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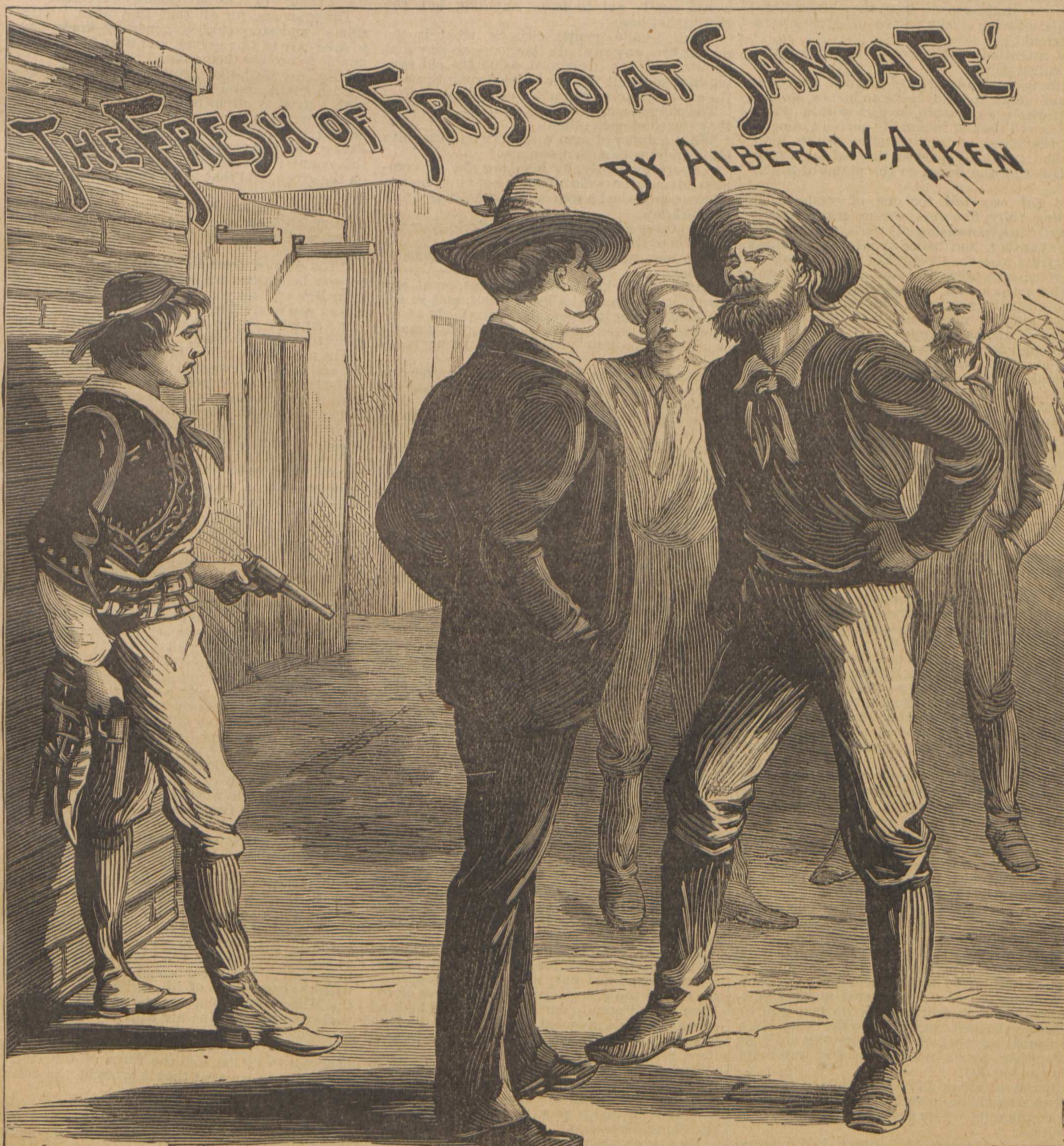
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Vol. L.



"MY NAME IS JACKSON BLAKE, AND WHEN I AM AT HOME THE BOYS GENERALLY CALL ME THE FRESH OF FRISCO."

The Fresh of Frisco at Santa Fé;

OR,

THE STRANGER SHARP.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "OVERLAND KIT," "RED ARROW,"
"THE WOLF-DEMON," "RED REVOLVER,"
"THE FRESH OF FRISCO," "LOST IN
PARIS," "SUNDOWN," "JOE
PHENIX," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A RUCTION.

It was a bright moonlight night—the moon-beams so powerful that one could almost see to pick up a pin from the ground.

The clocks had just marked the hour of twelve but the grand plaza, as the square in the center of the town of Santa Fé is called, was filled with a crowd of excited, angry men, whose numbers were constantly being increased.

It was a strange, wild scene, and one that could not possibly be witnessed in any other land but that over which floats the Stars and Stripes.

All of the men in the crowd were armed, and nearly every one of them flourished a weapon high in the air.

Men of almost every nation and of every clime were in the crowd, from the white-skinned European to the dusky native of Africa's burning strand.

The attention of the crowd was directed to one central point.

With back firmly pressed against the doory walls of one of the old Mexican houses, stood a really glorious creature, a girl within whose veins flowed the red Indian life-current, mingled with the blood of the intruding white man, who had gradually pushed the red-skins from the shores of the ocean to the plains of the interior.

The girl was tall for one of womankind, standing fully five feet, seven; magnificently proportioned, possessing all the savage beauty of the panther, and being apparently tolerably well-gifted with the strength of that animal.

Her features were regular and clearly-cut, and there was a wild, savage beauty to the face which strongly reminded one of a moun-ain lioness, perched upon some rocky crag, proud mistress of all she surveyed.

Although her features and the long black hair, soft and shining like a tangled mass of silk, falling well over her shoulders, betrayed her sex, yet from her dress one would never have guessed that she was not a man, for she was habited in a full Mexican suit of velvet, resplendent with gold lace and buttons; her hat was off—upon the ground at her feet—a heavy Mexican sombrero of the usual pattern.

As we have said, her back was braced against the wall; in each hand she flourished an ivory-handled seven-shooter, self-cockers, as pretty a pair of tools as any man would care to own.

And it was around this strange girl that the crowd swelled and howled and brandished their weapons in the air.

But the members of the multitude were careful to keep at a safe distance away, though; none of them seemed desirous of testing the valor or marksmanship of the girl by approaching nearer than a hundred feet.

The crowd formed a half-circle around her, keeping at just about this distance away.

It is of the old city of Santa Fé we write, in the Territory of New Mexico, the town which boasted an existence in the old days when the mail-clad Spaniards crossed the stormy seas, eager to win a golden fortune in the New World.

The time of our story is some years ago, long before the scream of the Iron Horse woke the echoes of the hills fringing the valleys of the Rio Grande del Norte.

But to return to our tale.

"She ought to be lynched!" cried one tall fellow, whose gaunt features, spare though muscular form, and long, clubbed hair would seem to denote a son of the great Southwest.

"Burn her alive!" yelled another one of the crowd, a short, thick-set fellow, whose swarthy skin, glittering, bead-like eyes and harsh, ebony-hued hair, told that he was Mexican born.

"Throw her into the river and duck her until she swallows so much water that she can't keep on the top of it," suggested another worthy gentleman, in enormous top-boots, corduroy pantaloons tucked carefully into the boots, and a red-flannel shirt which had evidently not been on familiar terms with soap and water for many a long day.

He was a gross, fat fellow, whose very appearance would be enough to breed a famine in any community where provisions were not over plentiful.

"Hang her, lynch her, drown her!" roared the crowd, following the example set by their leaders, but for all the ferocious words, none of them seemed anxious to "take the bull by the

horns," as it were, by venturing to come to close quarters with the woman against whom they expressed such sanguinary sentiments.

"Oh, you dogs!" cried the girl, in contemptuous scorn, speaking English in the most fluent manner and without a trace of foreign accent. "You can bark loud enough, but where is the one among you bold enough to try his teeth?"

There was another outburst of discordant cries at this taunt, but there did not seem to be any of them anxious to take up the defiance.

And just at this point a new-comer pressed his way through the circle.

A man whom the streets of Santa Fé had never seen before—a handsome, dashing fellow, a little above the medium height, and superbly built, with the air of a regular dare-devil about him.

His face was a frank and honest one, and he had eyes so keen and true it would seem that, like an eagle, he could look full-orbed at the sun in all its noonday power.

He was dressed in a black corduroy suit, nicely made and fitting his elegant figure to perfection, and upon his head he wore a cream-colored slouch hat, with a high crown and a soft brim, a regular brigand-like hat.

There were no weapons visible upon his person, and yet, somehow, there wasn't a man in the crowd who didn't feel perfectly sure the stranger was "well-heeled," for there was an air about him which seemed to say that he was an expert in the use of all sorts of weapons, and would not be apt to have anything but the best in that line.

"Hallo, hallo, gentle citizens, what is the matter here anyway? Is the deuce to pay and no pitch hot?" he exclaimed, using the old saying and speaking in a tone which rung through the air as clear as the notes of a silver bell.

The citizens stared at the stranger, and then they stared at each other.

What manner of man was this who came into their midst with such a swagger?

A sport evidently, by his dress, for no common adventurer could afford to rig up in such a fashion, but who he was or where he came from no one knew.

The stranger had entered the circle near the spot where the Missourian stood.

This man was one of the leading citizens of the town.

Lafayette Pickerel was his name, or at any rate that is what he called himself, and in the Western region it is considered the height of ill-breeding to ever cast a doubt upon a man's word when he tells you that his name is so-and-so.

But as Lafayette Pickerel was altogether too long a name for general use—"it might do for Sunday," had been suggested when he first made his appearance in Santa Fé, "as there was time then to wrestle with such a thing"—the boys soon reduced his name to Laff Pick, and he was never called anything else.

Laff Pick was one of the bullies of the town, a big, muscular fellow, though wonderfully thin and scrawny for a man of his size—"not an ounce of fat upon me," he was wont to boast, and since he made his appearance in Santa Fé he had been the hero of fully half a hundred personal encounters.

No man ever came into Santa Fé "sp'iling for a fight," big or little, white, red, black or yellow, but he was accommodated to his heart's content if Laff Pick was anywhere in the neighborhood.

He was like the little traveler, the hero of the ancient border story, who engaged a big fighting man to travel with him and fight his battles because he said he was always being imposed upon.

But when he and his henchman started on the road, in every town they came to the little traveler picked a quarrel with the biggest man he could find and then called in his bully to polish off the local bruiser.

The hired man stood it for three days, fighting nine pitched battles in that time, and then he begged to be released from his contract, alleging as an excuse that he thought his employer was inclined to be "a little quarrelsome."

And this was the case with Laff Pick; he was inclined to be quarrelsome, and all any muscular stranger had to do was to look cross-eyed at him and there would either be a fight or a foot-race instanter, right off the reel.

And now, when this genteel-looking stranger, with his store clothes, his "b'iled" shirt, cream-colored, dandified hat, made his appearance, the end of the extremely prominent nose of the Missourian began to curl in the air, and he kind of sniffed for a moment as though he had an idea that the presence of the stranger tainted the atmosphere.

And as he surveyed the stranger one thing only troubled the warlike Missourian.

Would this dandified chap have sand enough to stand up to his gruel and take a first-class thrashing like a man?

He was very much afraid that he wouldn't.

In his "heart of hearts," Laff Pick was longing eagerly for the chance to roll the stranger in the dust and take the shine out of his nobby

suit of clothes, and a grin came over his thin face as he thought the matter over, and in his "mind's eye" reflected what a nice-looking object the stranger would be after he had wiped up the street with him for about half-a-dozen times. Even the Indian girl was forgotten in his anxiety to get a "whack" at the new-comer.

CHAPTER II.

THE MISSOURIAN GOES FOR WOOL.

"HALLO, hallo, whar in thunder did you spring from?" exclaimed Laff Pick, imitating the manner of the other to the best of his ability.

"My esteemed friend with the big bugle, I am from California," replied the other, with the greatest politeness, and making a graceful bow to the Missourian as he spoke.

"From Californy! Durn my cats! if I didn't think you'd broke loose from a monkey circus, ho, ho, ho," and the Missourian laughed loudly as though he considered he had given utterance to a very witty remark.

Some few of the crowd—jackals who followed the lead of this local lion—tittered, encouraged by the example of their patron.

But the great majority of the bystanders looked on with a great deal of interest.

They understood that the Missourian intended to pick a quarrel with the stranger if he could, and although the Missourian seemed to be a bigger man than the unknown sharp, though not nearly so well put together, they did not feel so sure that Laff Pick would have such a "soft thing" of it as he evidently expected.

These sports, for all that they wore "b'iled shirts" and store-clothes, generally knew how to take care of themselves, and were not usually unable to protect themselves.

"No, my Cath-like brother, I am from the Golden State, and I never had anything to do with a monkey circus in my life."

"My name is Jackson Blake, and when I am home the boys generally call me the Fresh of Frisco, and I have traveled all the way down to this country to teach you lambs how to gamble on the green, and that is the kind of a hairpin I am."

"Wa-al, you are kinder fresh, I reckon," the Missourian observed, coming quite close to the other, and surveying him in a contemptuous manner.

"Too durned fresh to stay in this hyer town, so you had better up boots and git as soon as your legs will let you, or you may get salted in a way you won't like."

"And who will do that job, big-nosed stranger?" the other retorted.

The men of the crowd began to grow interested, and every eye was fixed upon the two.

Contrary to the expectation of a great number of the throng, the stranger was showing fight; the smooth way in which he had at first spoken had led some of them to believe that he would not dare to stand up to the bully.

Now the Missourian was rather sensitive in regard to his nose, which was, to use the Southwestern term, a regular "wind-splitter," so he took the other up quite savagely.

"Say! if you know when you're well off, you'll quit yer funny business 'bout my nose. I don't allow nobody to shoot off their mouth 'bout my nose!" he cried, angrily.

"It's a fine bugle: it would make a good ice-pick, or if the point was whittled down a little it would do for a screw-driver."

The Missourian could hardly believe his ears.

After being duly warned, the stranger had dared to go on with his jokes.

He caught a glimpse of a smile, too, on the faces of some of the bystanders, and he understood that he must put a stop to this sort of thing at once or else the "gang" would begin to have a poor opinion of him.

"You're a stranger—you don't know me from a side of sole-leather, of course, and so I hate to walk over you without warning, but you've got to take that 'ere back about my nose or else I'll wipe these streets with yer pesky carcass!"

"Oh, you're a fraud—a bag of wind—a regular gas-bag!" cried the other.

"I'm yer antelope!" yelled Laff Pick, enraged at these insults, and he struck at the face of the stranger.

A straight right-hander, well delivered, that the Missourian had calculated would fell the other all in a heap; and it might have done so if it had reached the mark for which it was aimed, but it did not, for the Fresh parried it as easily as though it was but the blow of a child, and then, before the other could recover himself, with the open palm of his right hand he gave the Missourian a slap on the side of the face that rung through the air with a report like a pistol-shot.

Laff Pick staggered back, amazed at this unexpected reception, and the force of the stinging blow was so great that it brought the tears to his eyes.

A cry of rage, like unto the roar of a wild beast, escaped from him, and then he made another rush at his antagonist, showering blow after blow upon him.

But not one of them did the least damage.

The Fresh, as light on his feet as a dancing-

master, retreated before the tempest of blows, and then, when the Missourian, exhausted, paused to recover his wind, with wonderful quickness administered another slap on the other side of the face with the palm of the left hand which made a louder report, and stung, if possible, even worse than the other slap.

The bystanders looked on in amazement; this beat anything that any of them had ever seen.

Since the town of Santa Fé had had a local habitation and a name, dating back to the old Montezuma time, it had never witnessed such a peculiar fight as this.

Utterly exasperated by this last affront, the Missourian made a superhuman effort to close with his nimble-footed antagonist.

If he could once come to close quarters and get a chance to use his bear-like hug, Laff Pick felt sure he could break the stranger in two.

But whether he could perform this feat or not the Missourian never got a chance to ascertain, for as he rushed at the stranger sport, endeavoring to clasp him in his arms, the other dodged nimbly to one side, stuck out his foot, and Laff Pick, stumbling over it, came heavily to the ground.

And then came in the fun of the fight.

With a series of the most vigorous kicks the stranger rolled the Missourian over and over in the dirt, kicking up such a dust that Laff Pick became half-strangled, and at last, thoroughly sick of this decidedly one-sided fight he was forced to cry:

"Hold on, hold on; I've got enough—let up on me, or I'll choke to death!"

"Well, I don't suppose anybody wants to start a new graveyard, so I won't turn you into a cold corpus this time," the victor responded.

A more thoroughly used-up and woebegone man was never seen than the Missourian when some of his satellites assisted him to rise.

The stranger had cut his comb in the most complete manner, and he could no longer lay claim to the title, "The best man in Santa Fé."

"This ain't the end of it 'tween us," he growled, as assisted by a couple of friends he hobbled away.

"Always at home and open for visitors," remarked the Fresh, in his cool, off-hand way.

"If you don't see what you want call for it."

"Well, if you ain't a hummer," remarked one of the admiring crowd.

"Oh, yes; I'm a plum bird on a lily-root; but now, fellow-citizens, to come back to our mutton. I'm a stranger in this hyer town, and I am really curious to know the meaning of this gathering.

"I presume that divine, though a little off-colored beauty over there has something to do with it."

And then he took off his hat and made the girl, who still stood on the defensive with her back against the wall, a polite bow.

The Indian maid looked at him with astonishment, not knowing what to make of his strange behavior.

A fat man in the crowd volunteered to explain.

This man of flesh was known as Joe Jimsonweed, and he was the proprietor of one of the principal drinking-places in the town, which bore the odd name of the "Forty Rod Saloon."

His explanation of the title was that his whisky was so powerful that if a customer took more than the usual "three-fingers" for a drink it would be sure to lay him out before he got forty rods from the shebang.

But this yarn was regarded by most of the well-posted men about town as a wily invention of the saloon-keeper designed to encourage moderate drinking and to reduce the consumption and in the same ratio increase the profits.

"I kin explain the hull business to ye!" exclaimed Mr. Jimsonweed.

This name, by the way, was regarded as being entirely fictitious, and more than a dozen of his best customers had told him openly that his real name was Butterhead, or Punkintop or some other commonplace appellation, and that his selection of such an aristocratic-sounding name as Jimsonweed betrayed a decided bearing toward the effete ranks of the foreign nobility.

The landlord never attempted to argue with his guests, he only grinned, but held on to the name just the same.

"Sir, I shall be delighted to hear your explanation," and Blake made the host a low bow, and the crowd, quick to notice anything of this kind, unanimously decided that for ease and grace this Stranger Sharp could double discount any sport that had ever struck Santa Fé.

"Yes, sir-ee, hoss-fly, I kin give the hull business away, 'cos it was in my place that the ruction took place!" exclaimed the fat landlord, swelling out with the importance of the occasion.

"Proceed, worthy sir, unfold your tale and let it be as brief as woman's love," remarked the Fresh, with great dignity and bestowing another courtly bow upon the fat landlord.

But that worthy was so taken by surprise by the oddly-worded speech, not being used to quotations from the current poets that for a moment he lost the use of his tongue.

CHAPTER III.

THE STORY OF THE DISTURBANCE.

In a moment, though, Jimsonweed recovered himself and then proceeded to explain.

"As I said, the hull business came off in my place. I keep the Forty Rod Saloon, I do, as fine a shebang as is to be found west of Kansas City—"

"Never mind advertising your saloon," interrupted the Fresh.

"We will assume that there never was such a saloon since the days of the Queen of Sheba and her ancient pard, Solomon, the Magnificent.

"Drive on with your mule team and come to the facts of the case!"

"Oh, I'm gitting at it; but don't you forget to remember that I've got the boss saloon of this town, and I'll be proud to entertain a gentleman like yourself any time."

"If you don't come to your story mighty durned quick, hang me if I let you tell it at all!"

"I'm right thar now, you bet!" exclaimed the landlord.

"Wa-al, in the back of my place is a quiet room with a side door for the accommodation of the big-bugs of the town, who don't want to stand up at the bar and h'ist their p'ison with the crowd.

"It's fitted up with some tables, and a nicer place for a quiet poker-party can't be scared up in the Territory.

"The end of the bar jist projects into the room, so I can serve the lickar thar without having to come from behind the counter.

"This yere was pretty well occupied to-night until 'bout eleven o'clock, and then all the gang got out except three of the boys, Laff Pick, that was the fellow you booted jist now, you know."

"Oh, was it? That was his name, eh?" the Fresh remarked.

"Well, nobody introduced us, but I've kinder an idea that we won't feel like as if we were strangers to each other the next time we meet."

This odd remark brought a grin to the faces of the bystanders, but Blake was as grave as an owl.

"Oh, I guess you two will be apt to know each other the next time," Jimsonweed observed, dryly.

"As far as I kin see it strikes me that you made quite a striking impression upon Laff."

The crowd laughed outright at this choice piece of wit.

As a general rule there were always plenty of men to laugh at the jest of the man who had the power to either "hang 'em up" or to refuse credit at the bar of the Forty Rod Saloon.

"Wa-al, wa-al, as I was a-saying, thar was Laff and a couple of pards of his'n in the private room, Jim Bowlegs, who, for circumstances over which he ain't got any control, is not to the fore jist now, and our Mexican friend and brother, José Vasquez, hyer."

This was the yellow-skinned, ugly-looking, desperado-like fellow who had been so fierce in his threats against the girl.

He now stood at the elbow of the saloon-keeper, scowling at the man who had succeeded in cutting the comb of the bully of Santa Fé in a way that was to be despised.

"Happy to make your acquaintance," said Blake, with a graceful bow directed to the angry-looking Mexican.

"I've been such a short time in the town that I haven't had a chance to cultivate your acquaintance as yet, but I assure you, man of swarthy skin and savage mien, I shall improve the first opportunity."

Now this did not sound at all like a threat, but the Mexican took it to be one, and his scowl deepened, while his hand involuntarily sought the butt of one of the revolvers.

"Caramba!" he cried, hissing out the old Mexican oath in true "Greaser" style, "I shall be ready fer you whenever you seek me, but I do not fight with fists like a child; I use a man's weapon."

"Oh, I can see that you are game to the backbone. There isn't many things you are afraid of!"

"Not one!" cried the Mexican, proudly.

"Oh, yes, I know a couple."

The cool style in which the assertion was made astonished the bravo.

"Two things that I am afraid of?" he blustered.

"Oh, yes, there's no use of you trying to get out of it, for there's plenty of evidence to prove my assertion."

"Name the things!" cried the Mexican, suspecting that there was some trick in the matter, but too dull-witted to guess what it was.

"Soap and water!"

The bystanders roared with laughter, for the shot struck home.

The Mexican, like a great many of the lower order of the race to which he belonged, was noted for his dirty appearance.

"Oh, well, I am not a dandy," he growled, sorely enraged at thus being made the butt of the crowd, and in his secret heart he swore that nothing but the life-blood of the jeering stranger would serve to wipe out the insult which had been put upon him.

But the treatment which his pard had received was a warning to him not to rashly attempt to seek satisfaction from the stranger, without

being able to start in with all the advantages on his side.

"Wa-al, as I was a-saying," said the landlord, "these hyer three gents were in a private room a-fooling away their time at a game of poker; thar wasn't much fun or business for any one of the three, for thar wasn't any pilgrim or tender-foot present for to make things lively and interesting, and dog won't eat dog, you know."

This revelation of the landlord's opinion of the three pards, whose reputation was not over and above good, caused a smile to illuminate the face of the crowd.

"Jist as things were going on in this dull and uninteresting way, who should walk into the room but Lute Winnemucca."

"Lute Winnemucca?" said the Fresh, in a tone of question.

"Yes, that's the red gal over yonder," said Jimsonweed, nodding toward the red maid, who still held her defiant position with her back against the house wall.

"She's an Injun princess, you know, from 'way-back."

"A civilized Injun, you bet! You kin tell that from the way she's rigged out and the style in which she handles her shooting-irons."

"Lucretia Winnemucca is the handle that the Gospel sharp gave her when she was a babby, but that's too durned long for a man to wrestle with in these busy times, so we jist call her Lute for short."

"She runs a cattle ranch up in the foot-hills, and is a mighty sassy, independent sort of a gal, seeing that she ain't anything but a copper-colored red-skin, no how you kin fix it."

"Your judgment is extremely correct, mighty satrap," observed the Fresh, with a polite bow to the saloon-keeper.

"The only good Injun is a dead Injun."

A glance of mingled scorn and defiance flashed from the dark eyes of the Indian girl as she listened to this sweeping condemnation of her race.

"That's true as Gospel, in course; any Western man knows that."

"Wa-al, as I war a-sayin', this gal comes marching in, and she walks up to me behind the bar, as bold as brass—"

"Oh, no; I wouldn't believe that of you, even if you do say it," interrupted Blake, with a shake of the head.

"You couldn't look bold as brass; it isn't in your shrinking, tender nature, rare son of these fruitful Western plains!"

Some of the crowd snickered and Jimsonweed looked annoyed.

It seemed as if the Stranger Sharp was making fun of him, and yet he was perfectly serious and respectful in his manner.

"You're the darnedest cuss for highfalutin' talk that I ever run into," grumbled the saloon-ist.

"I didn't say I was bold as brass—it was the Injun gal who was."

"Oh, yes, there isn't any doubt about that; she is bold enough, and as divinely beautiful, too, in her fair proportions as ever a sculptor's genius carved out of finest marble," and Blake surveyed the girl with critical eyes, just as if she was a horse or dog that he thought of purchasing.

An angry, scornful look came into the girl's eyes, and she set her pearly white teeth firmly together.

"Wa-al, to come to the p'int, the gal had some gold nuggets she wanted to sell; I didn't dare to buy, for though they looked like the solid stuff, I got stuck once on bad nuggets by an Injun, and I've been kinder skittish ever since."

"She wanted the money bad, she said, and would let me have them cheap."

"Then Laff Pick spoke up; he didn't want to buy the nuggets, but he and his pards would play a game of poker with her for them."

"They say, stranger, that this 'ere Injun gal kin play as good a game of poker as any man that ever flipped a keerd in the territory."

"She war game for the trick; they went at it and she cleaned 'em from the word 'go.'"

"At last there was a big pot up, all of 'em had stayed in, but the ante got too high at last, and everybody went out but the gal and Jim Bowlegs, and they went on raising each other clean out of their boots."

"Jim got to the end of his pile at last and called for a show."

"The gal had three kings. Jim cried out that the pile was his'n, but dropped his cards onto the floor; when he picked them up he said he had four tens, but the gal understood that Jim had been down in his boot-leg for a card or two and wouldn't have it."

"She grabbed the pile, Jim showed fight, and she put a knife into him quicker'n a wink, knocked the other two down with the butt of her revolver and lit out—and that's why we are arter her."

"Jim is done for, I guess, and now, stranger, I put it to you—what ought to be done with such a gal?"

CHAPTER IV.

BULLION, THE ALCALDE.

"Run her for alcalde of the town!" replied the Fresh, promptly.

"She can have my vote, for, according to this account, I reckon you haven't got a better man in Santa Fé."

The citizens stared at each other when Blake made known his opinion so promptly, for that the Stranger Sharp should side with the despised red-skinned maiden was the last thing in their thoughts.

"Oh, but you don't seem to understand the rights of this matter!" exclaimed Jimsonweed, in disgust.

"Yes, yes, I do. These fellows attempted to beat the girl out of her money. She was man enough to stand up for what belonged to her, and got away with three men in a single fight."

"Now, that is what I call a pretty plucky thing to do, and I doubt very much if there is a man in the crowd who could hold his end up better under the circumstances."

There was a murmur of disapproval from the citizens at this speech, and Vasquez was prompt to take advantage of the feeling that had apparently risen against the stranger.

"That is no way to talk!" he cried. "That she-devil of a red-skin has murdered a white man and she must be made to answer for it. She's a rattlesnake, and must be trodden out of existence!"

Two vigorous strides, and Jackson Blake stood within reaching distance of the Mexican, who, alarmed by this sudden demonstration, clapped his hand to one of his revolvers, but did not have time to draw the weapon ere the Fresh was face to face with him.

Blake's powerful right arm was drawn back, all of the crowd now understood what a fearful weapon it was, and the bystanders almost held their breath, comprehending that if the muscular arm ever shot forth the chances were a hundred to one that the Mexican would be knocked out of time at the first lick.

"You are a liar!" cried Jackson Blake, impressively, and yet without the slightest trace of excitement being visible in his manner.

"Do you understand that—do I speak plainly enough? You are a liar, and this girl is no rattlesnake, and she is not going to be trodden out of existence by any such miserable reptile as you are!"

"Take it back, or I'll hit you so hard that you'll think a dozen mules, all compressed into one, have been putting their hind legs into your face!"

The Mexican turned almost white with rage, but there was a gleam of determination in the eyes of the other that made him hesitate to brave the threatened blow.

"Give me some show!" he gasped, so overcome by rage that he could scarcely speak.

"I am not a fist-fighter."

"Never mind whether you are or not," the Fresh replied.

"That is not the question before the meeting. What I want to know is, do you take back what you said about yonder Injun gal. Take it back or I'll hammer you!"

"And after this little matter is adjusted—after you take it back, if you want satisfaction with knife, rifle or revolver, I'm your man, in any way or any shape!"

"But take back your word you shall or I'll know the reason why!"

"By this time the Mexican had reflected upon the matter. He was in a tight place, there wasn't any mistake about it, and there was only one way to get out of it.

Vasquez was a brave man enough, but as he had said he was not a fist-fighter and he had a decided aversion to having the good-looking face upon which he prided himself—for he was quite a gallant among the dark-eyed Mexican señoritas—spoiled by the iron-like fist of the North American.

Then, too, the creed which had been beaten into him from boyhood, was never to get into a difficulty without having a decided advantage.

It was the ancient tiger plan, recoil for a time to make the leap more certain.

If he accepted the stranger's defiance now, the other would have an equal chance with himself, and this was not what he wanted at all.

His idea was to catch the insolent sport in some trap where he would have no show.

So, with an ill-grace, he complied with the demand made by the Fresh of Frisco.

"All right, I take it back; she ain't a rattlesnake; does that satisfy you?" he growled.

"Yes, that's about right; you might say, too, it is your private opinion that she is an angel without wings," the Fresh remarked, reflectively.

"Ah!" and with a muttered curse the Mexican turned upon his heel and strode away.

"He's not anxious for any more of this picnic just now," Blake observed.

"And now, fellow-citizens, I want to raise my voice and talk to you," he continued.

"I s'pose about all of you have got a kind of a prejudice against this girl just because her skin doesn't happen to be quite as white as your own, and I must say, my noble friends and countrymen, there are a good many of you within the sound of my voice who would be decidedly whiter if they washed themselves oftener, but that's neither here nor there.

"In regard to this girl, however, you're all wrong; she was in the right when she kicked against being swindled, and there ain't a man of you hyer who wouldn't do the same under like circumstances."

"When I run across anything of this kind I have to sail in and do my best to straighten matters out."

"That's where I get my nick-name from, you know, the Fresh of Frisco."

"I am from Frisco, and once in a while you would be safe in betting your bottom dollar that I am too fresh for anything."

"Mebbe I'll get salted one of these days and that is what I'm traveling around looking for, but when I am salted, I'm afraid it will take so durned much that it will make the article scarce."

"Now, friends, and fellow-Romans, this hyer business is all wrong. You've no right to hound this girl, and if there's any man in the crowd that thinks to the contrary I stand ready to convince him that he don't know what he is talking about, with any weapon that he can name, from a harpoon down to a hairpin."

"Now, don't all speak at once; where's the man who 'calls' me?"

The caution for the crowd not to all speak at the same time seemed to be a needless one, for none of them evinced any disposition to say anything.

The men in the throng merely looked at each other in an inquiring sort of way, as much as to ask:

"Are you going to take this thing up?"

But after the display that they had witnessed of the stranger's prowess, none of them seemed anxious to espouse a quarrel in which they would have to encounter him for an antagonist.

There was quite a pause.

The face of the Indian girl was a study.

She still grasped her weapons firmly, but the fierce, warlike look had vanished from her face, and there was a deal of wonderment in the dark eyes which so earnestly gazed at the stranger, who, apparently for sheer mischief alone, had dared to step in between an angry mob and its prey.

"Nobody says nothing to nobody," observed the Fresh.

"I take it then that there isn't anybody here who is anxious to plant, or be planted, under six feet of mother earth."

"Lucretia Winnemucca, sometimes called Lute Winnemucca, noble princess of the aboriginal line, you are free! Git as soon as you like!"

The girl hesitated for a moment and glanced as if in doubt at the semicircle of men who still surrounded her.

Blake understood what was passing within her mind.

"It's all right; don't you be skeered, dark-faced princess of the sun. No one will molest you!" exclaimed the Fresh, with a commanding wave of his muscular arm.

"You have been tried by a jury of your peers and duly acquitted, the verdict being, the cuss got exactly what he deserved."

"Go forth then to fresh fields and pastures new. For the time being I constitute myself alcalde of the burg, and if any one objects let him step forward now, or forevermore hold his peace!"

The citizens looked at each other; there were men in the crowd that rather resented the "frills" put on by this audacious stranger, but the image of the outrageously-kicked Laff Pick was still present in their recollection, and none of them were anxious to pick a quarrel with the conqueror so as to give him a chance to try his muscular powers upon them.

"Silence gives consent! I am the alcalde of Santa Fé, and my right there is none to dispute. Lute Winnemucca, dark-eyed gazelle of the bounding prairies, git up and dust!" exclaimed Blake, in the burlesque manner peculiar to him.

The girl stepped forward from the shelter of the wall, and as she did so the sound of horses' hoofs sounded on the air.

The crowd turned their gaze up the street.

Three horses with riders were advancing at a brisk trot, and at their heels came a body of a half a dozen men on foot hurrying forward in order to keep up with the horses.

"The alcalde, the alcalde!" cried the members of the crowd.

"Hallo, hallo!" exclaimed the Fresh, "is there another alcalde in the field? If there is I reckon I'll have to abdicate, or else we shall have a fight, and that wouldn't be wise."

The crowd were right in their surmise.

It was the alcalde of the town who was approaching, and with him came Miguel Santilla, chief of police, and the alcalde's daughter rode on the other hand.

These were the horsemen, and the men on foot were the police of the town who had been hastily summoned from their slumbers in the calaboose when the intelligence that there was a riot in the town plaza reached the ears of the alcalde.

Martin Marmaduke, commonly called Old Bullion, the alcalde, was a decided character.

In person he was six-feet tall and strongly

built. A lionlike man, with long, iron-gray hair, and a splendid beard of the same hue, which swept down over his breast.

His daughter, Isabelle, was a blonde beauty of commanding figure, with the most beautiful blue eyes and golden hair, regular features and a queenly carriage.

The chief of police was a man of forty, a typical Mexican, but massively built.

The crowd gave way as the cavalcade approached, but Blake stood his ground.

The alcalde reined in his horse right opposite to the young man and transfixed him with a stony stare which the Fresh returned with interest.

"What is the meaning of this disturbance?" cried Old Bullion.

"Well, you see, I, as alcalde of this town of Santa Fé—" began Blake.

"You, alcalde?" roared Old Bullion, in a rage.

CHAPTER V.

A NOVEL CLAIM.

THE alcalde of Santa Fé, Martin Marmaduke, was an odd genius.

He was called Old Bullion because he was the principal owner of some extremely rich mines in New Mexico, from which he had acquired a colossal fortune, and all the outside buttons on his garments were gold-pieces.

The massive gold watch-chain which encircled his neck was as large round as the thumb of a good-sized man.

He was dressed in the Mexican fashion, excepting that he wore riding-breeches of buckskin and high boots of untanned leather.

The black silk scarf which he wore knotted around his neck in sailor fashion was passed through a rudely-formed gold ring which looked as if it had been cut from a nugget of virgin gold by some miner with a jack-knife, but in this rude ring blazed a diamond worth at least five thousand dollars of any man's money.

Upon the little finger of his left hand shone a similar gem.

It had often been calculated that if some enterprising road-agent should succeed some day in "holding up" Old Bullion, the alcalde of Santa Fé, he would be able to get away with ten or twelve thousand dollars for his trouble, for, in addition to the valuables upon his person, the old man always carried a well-filled pocket-book, seldom being abroad without from a thousand to two thousand dollars upon his person.

And by virtue of his wealth, as well as by the high-handed way he had of carrying matters, he ruled the town of Santa Fé as though he was a king possessed of almost absolute power.

At the time of which we write there were not many Americans in the town, and the native inhabitants regarded it as being a rather good thing to be ruled over by a man so rich that though he enforced absolute obedience to his will, yet spent his money as though it was as valueless as water.

The daughter, Isabelle, a beauty if there ever was one in this world, was a decided contrast to her sire in her taste for outward display.

She wore but little jewelry, a single diamond button at her throat, and a small stone in a ring upon her little finger.

But her figure was so superb and the beauty of her face so dazzling that she looked like a queen in her plain, dark-green riding-habit, and she rode her jet-black, high-mettled steed with the skill of an empress of the circus ring.

Old Bullion was a man of violent temper, and always flew into the most outrageous passion if everything was not exactly to his liking.

The reader can judge then of his rage when the stranger, who, to his eyes, appeared like an effeminate dandy, boldly assumed to be the alcalde of Santa Fé.

"Yes, certainly I am, elected to-night, alcalde of Santa Fé, and from the brilliant way in which I have commenced to administer the office, the conviction has dawned upon my mind that I am going to make the gayest old alcalde that this village ever possessed."

For a few moments Old Bullion's rage was too great to allow him to speak.

The cool impudence of the other dumfounded him.

Glancing around at the faces of the bystanders, he saw upon every one a broad grin.

This in a measure opened his eyes, for it convinced him that he had fallen in with a practical joker, who knew who he was, and was unwise enough to endeavor to have a joke at his expense.

"He laughs best who laughs last," thought the old man. "Wait, my fine fellow, and see if I do not have you on the hip before we get through."

"Oho, you are the alcalde of Santa Fé then?" he said at last.

"The force of circumstances has thrown the burden upon my unworthy shoulders," the Fresh replied, airily.

"It is one of those rare cases where the office seeks the man and not the man the office."

"Well, if you are the alcalde of Santa Fé, will you have the kindness to tell me who I am?"

"Upon my word," remarked Blake, survey-

ing the other from head to heel, "if the terrible spirit of unbelief, now so prevalent in these latter days, had not taught us that the old-time stories of the ancient gods and goddesses were all a pack of lies, I should be tempted to imagine that you were great Jove himself, descended from high Olympus and trying to amuse himself by running a stock ranch in New Mexico, for surely this fair girl by your side is Venus herself, if ever Venus lived and breathed upon this earth."

The compliment was so unexpected, and yet so nicely put, that the lady could not forbear smiling and slightly nodding her head in acknowledgment of the courteous way in which the Fresh raised his hat at the end of the speech.

The old man was considerably mollified by the words; he was not averse to flattery, and praise of his girl, too, the idol of his heart, was sweet to his ear.

"You've got a pretty good tongue in your head, young man," the alcalde observed.

"But I must say I reckon you use it a heap sight too much once in a while."

"Of course I know that; there isn't a man in the world who knows it any better," the Fresh rejoined. "'A still tongue makes a wise head,' saith the old proverb, but I go on a different plan altogether: 'A loose-jointed tongue gathers in many shekels!'"

"Don't work that way at all," the old alcalde growled.

"In my case it does!" asserted the Fresh, contradicting the old man with the utmost bluntness. "Look at me; don't I look prosperous? Do you see any evidence about me anywhere to warrant the opinion that the world does not go well with your humble servant to command?"

"Oh, all you sharps are always rigged up to kill," retorted the alcalde, "but as a rule all you have in the world you carry on your backs."

"Venerable man, you hit me just where I live when you say that. I will own up that I haven't got wealth enough on my person to purchase the biggest ranch that there is in Santa Fé."

"Or the smallest one either, for that matter," retorted the alcalde.

"That depends upon the price of the aforesaid small ranch," observed the Fresh, with perfect coolness.

"If you've got any little ones for a cent I reckon we would make a trade."

There was a general titter at this answer.

There isn't any people on the face of the earth so quick to appreciate extravagant humor as the men of the wild West.

"What kind of a burg do you think this town of Santa Fé is anyway?" asked Old Bullion, in assumed indignation.

"Talk 'bout ranches for a cent! Don't you know, you 'tarnel green tenderfoot, that we don't have no coin in this yere town lower than a quarter, and any man in these diggings that is any kind of a man at all feels mighty mean when he comes down below a dollar."

"You'll have to hoof it out of hyer if you are going to run on any sich low-down scale as that. Go back East, young man! We ain't got room in this hyer glorious country for any man who goes on a small basis."

"Don't you worry yourself about me; I'm well fixed. I am, although I've only got a solitary saw-buck left in my pocket," replied the Fresh.

"A ten-dollar note, eh?"

"That's the extent of my capital at present, but what of that? Such a circumstance doesn't faze a man of genius like myself for an instant."

"You have plenty of money here in Santa Fé?"

"Gobs of it!" exclaimed the old alcalde, with a comprehensive sweep of his broad hand.

"You can't strike a richer town this side of the Mississipp, if you take size into consideration."

"Well, then, I'm all right."

"How do you make that out?" asked Old Bullion, puzzled by the confident assertion.

"What difference does it make to you whether the town is rich or not? You can't get any of the money. There's no gold in the streets here to be had for the asking."

"Wait until I unfold myself and show you how. When I can work the raffle to get into a rich town with a ten-dollar bill in my pocket, there isn't any need for me to trouble myself about the future!" exclaimed the young man, in his lightest and gayest tone.

"In the first place, let me introduce myself. Of course we will not keep up the little joke now about my being the alcalde of the town, although if you had been here when I made my appearance about ten minutes ago, you would have really reckoned, from the scientific manner in which I ran things, that I was the healthiest old alcalde that you ever saw."

"My name is Jackson Blake, and I am from the Pacific slope—from San Francisco, and one of my peculiarities is that I am never able to hold my tongue or keep from interfering in any matter of importance that comes before me, whether I have anything to do with it or not."

"That's my weakness, and from that fact I

have acquired the nickname of the Fresh of Frisco, and I am so well known by that appellation on the Pacific slope, particularly down on the southern coast around Santa Barbara and San Diego, that you'll be apt to strike people along the line there who know a heap about the Fresh of Frisco, but wouldn't *savey* worth a cent on Jackson Blake."

"One particular peculiarity attaches itself to my name," he continued, carelessly.

"Men who claim to be good judges say that I am the best poker-player in California."

A hum of astonishment went through the crowd at this announcement, and the bystanders elbowed each other to get a better look at the man who claimed so great a title.

"Well, you don't look it," commented Old Bullion.

"Say! you've got ten dollars in your pocket; have you got the sand to go it odd or even with me on the note?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE FRESH'S SAND.

At this bold defiance there was a general hush of expectancy among the members of the crowd, as they anxiously waited to see in what spirit the stranger would receive this novel proposal.

"Have I got the sand?" the Fresh exclaimed. "Well, now, when you come to me for sand I want you to understand you have struck the right sharp."

"I'm open to bet anything I've got, from my hat down to my boots, that I am the sandiest man in this hyer territory."

"I'm your antelope on the ten-dollar note question, and I only wish it was a hundred instead of ten."

"Brag is a good dog, but hold fast is a better," dryly observed the alcalde.

"But I say!" he observed, abruptly, as a sudden idea occurred to him.

"Perhaps you've got the dead wood on me in this hyer thing."

"How so?"

"Mebbe you know the number of the note—know whether it is odd or even."

"What good will that do me when it's going to be your say-so?"

"Yes, yes, that is true. I never thought of that."

"But, to be honest with you, I don't know."

"There's only one number on a bank-bill or a greenback that I ever trouble my head about, and that is the figure which denotes the worth of the article."

"But to come down to business, for I'm eager to capture your saw-buck, what do you say, odd or even?"

And as he spoke, Blake drew a large, old-fashioned wallet from a secret pocket in the inside of his vest—a wallet large enough to hold a bill placed at full length—and drew from it an extremely dirty and disreputable-looking National bank-note.

The crowd gathered closely around, anxious to see the fun.

"Before you sing out, alcalde, for I take it you are the alcalde of this thriving burg, I'd like to go you a side bet of another ten that you are going to lose."

"Done!" exclaimed Old Bullion, promptly.

He was not the kind of man to be "bluffed" in his own town by the first impudent sharp that happened to stray into it.

"Sail in your elephants!"

"Even!" cried the alcalde.

"Odd, my gentle Jove!" returned the Fresh, holding up the bill so that the bystanders could see that his statement was correct.

"I'll trouble you, alcalde, for twenty dollars, if you please."

A hum of astonishment and admiration went through the crowd.

It was a rich joke on Old Bullion for him to be skinned by the stranger sharp, and the bystanders enjoyed it highly.

The alcalde was annoyed.

He pulled out his wad of bills, a roll as big as one's fist, which he always carried loose in his coat-pocket in the most careless manner, and selecting a couple of ten-dollar bills from the others, passed them one by one to the Fresh, who advanced to receive them.

But after the Fresh had taken the first bill, a sudden thought shot across the alcalde's brain and caused him to hold on to the second.

"It's all fair, I s'pose," he said, speaking in a dubious sort of way, as if he wasn't exactly sure of it.

"A square game and no mistake; you won this tenner, but seeing that ten dollars was all you had, what in thunder did you put up against the second ten?"

"My cheek," responded Blake, promptly.

"Good enough!" yelled one of the crowd, enjoying the joke.

"There wasn't anything said about the stakes being put up. Between two gentlemen like you and I, alcalde, the simple word is enough."

"Yes, I s'pose so," and the alcalde handed over the money.

Old Bullion was sore over his failure, and it was perfectly apparent that he was so.

"Now there's three saw-bucks instead of one!" exclaimed the Fresh, flourishing the notes in the air in a triumphant manner; and really it seemed as if he was doing all he could to crow over his triumph.

"Thirty dollars to the good!" he continued. "And before I am twenty-four hours older I shall strike some benighted individual who thinks he can play poker, when he can't, and I'll clean him up to the tune of a thousand or two, mebbe!"

"Oh, you mustn't crow so loud because you happened to tumble into a bit of good luck. It's ten to one you couldn't do it again!" Old Bullion observed.

"Now that's a rash statement, alcalde, and you wouldn't like to back that up with the solid stuff," said the Fresh, persuasively.

"Yes, I would!" exclaimed the old man, nettled by the manner in which the words were uttered, as well as by the doubting smile which played upon the handsome face of the sport, and so headlong he tumbled into the trap.

"Yes, sir, I would back it up with the solid stuff. Martin Marmaduke is not in the habit of saying anything which he will not back up even with his life if it is necessary!"

"You are one of the kind of men that I am always looking for," the Fresh observed, as softly as a cooing dove.

"Well, sir, that's the kind of man you'll find me all the time," replied the alcalde, drawing himself up proudly.

"Ten to one," observed Blake, reflectively.

"Colonel, that's awful big odds, and I'm so sure of winning that it almost seems to me as if it would be like robbery to take your money."

"Oh, don't you trouble yourself about that!" rejoined the alcalde, stiffly.

"Take all you can get honestly. That's good advice wherever you may happen to be."

"Ten to one—three hundred to thirty— Oh, colonel, I can't do it!" the Fresh exclaimed, abruptly, as though his conscience upbraided him.

"You spoke rashly, of course, and without due consideration; but I scorn to take an advantage; I'll let you off!"

By this time Old Bullion's blood was up; he was not much given to sporting, and fell easily into the trap laid for him by the wily Fresh of Frisco.

"No, you won't do anything of the kind!" the alcalde exclaimed.

"I want you to understand that we are both in for the war!"

"You know you can't do the trick the second time and that is the reason you want to get out, but I'm the kind of man that will hold you right up to the fodder-rack."

"Judge, I'll go you a side bet of three hundred even that I win this time too."

"Put up your cheek again as security?" asked the judge, sarcastically.

"Oh, yes, of course, and it's ample security too. I wouldn't sell this cheek of mine for three hundred thousand dollars, let alone three!"

"The one bet is enough this time; if you had the money to put up, we might talk about it."

"I'm agreeable any way you fix it," Blake replied, cheerfully.

"Now, general, are you ready?"

"Take the number of the first note?" the alcalde asked.

"Yes."

"Well, what is it?"

"Odd, like myself."

"Hang me if you haven't caught me again!" cried Old Bullion, annoyed.

The crowd generally snickered.

The alcalde was a popular man enough in the town, but he was known to be enormously rich, and the citizens at large who, as a matter of course, envied Old Bullion his riches, were disposed to rather enjoy the triumph of the stranger sharp.

Old Bullion did not bear his losses well though the sum was no more to him than a flea-bite, and it was with a very ill-grace indeed that he paid over the money from his roll.

And the alcalde's daughter was annoyed too. Her brilliant eyes flashed and her lips curled with scorn as she gazed upon the grinning bystanders and noticed how genuine was the enjoyment that they so plainly manifested.

The idea that this common gambler sport— for such by his dress he evidently was—should be able to get the better of her father in such an extremely simple way, seemed something perfectly monstrous to her.

"Three hundred and thirty dollars to the good!" exclaimed Blake, waving the bills in the air.

"Well, now, with such a start as that, I reckon I can chip into the biggest poker game that's run in the town."

"Say, alcalde, I hate to clean you in this way without your being able to get a show for your money, so I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll slap up this three hundred and thirty against an equal amount from you. You can have the say-so, or I, just as you like."

The face of Old Bullion plainly betrayed that he was strongly tempted to take up this banter.

"You've got the best of me this time, you know, for if I win it will be for the third time

in succession, which don't often happen but then I'm a fool for luck."

"I'll do it, though I don't make a practice of this sort of thing," Old Bullion declared.

"You ought to give me odds now by rights, for the chances are about a million to one against me, but I'll win all the same."

"Take the bottom bill of the roll this time," suggested Old Bullion.

"All right; it doesn't make any difference to me. Shall I call out or you?"

"Oh, I'll give you the chance again."

"It's odd again, like myself, for a million, if I had the money to put up!"

And it was odd.

For the third time in succession the Fresh of Frisco had won; six hundred and sixty dollars to the good. Such a run of luck was not common in the town of Santa Fé.

CHAPTER VII.

THE AMBUSCADE.

A LONG breath came from the lips of the crowd, and each man looked at his fellow as much as to say:

"Did you ever see such a streak of luck before?"

The alcalde was disgusted; he thought the chances were decidedly in his favor in this last inning, and now he mentally cursed his own stupidity in being bantered into the wagers, for he clearly understood, now that he took time to reflect upon the matter, that if it had not been for the persuasive ways of the wily stranger, he most certainly would not have made the third wager, and, possibly, not the second.

As we have said, it wasn't the loss of the money, but the humiliation of being beaten by the stranger, that rankled in the alcalde's breast.

Slowly he counted out the money and placed the bills in the hands of Blake.

"It makes a pretty good roll, doesn't it?" the Fresh observed, as he contemplated the money which had been so easily won.

"This is what I call a miraculous increase!"

"A solitary ten-dollar note expands into six hundred and sixty."

"A man wouldn't make any mistake in saying that that was a pretty good run of luck, I suppose," he continued, in a calculating sort of way; "a fellow would be safe in betting about a million to one that an odd number wouldn't come up for the fourth time."

"Say, alcalde, I'm a real generous sort of chap when you come to get acquainted with me—when you come to know me right well and sample me clear down to the bed-rock."

"Now I'm going to give you another chance. I'll—"

"No, no, I've got enough!" hastily exclaimed Old Bullion. "I'm not much of a sporting man, anyway, and I don't care to get in too deep; not that I care for the money. Thank Heaven, I have enough to lose a thousand bets like this without feeling it!"

"Oh, I'm not the kind of man to try and banter you into anything," the Fresh protested.

"I was only going to say that if you wanted your revenge I was ready to accommodate you, and I would be glad to put up all I've won against a similar stake on your part that the note will come up odd for the fourth time, and you can pick it from anywhere you like in the roll of bills."

Such wonderful confidence in his luck was simply astounding in the opinion of the crowd, and all moved a little nearer, anxious to see if the alcalde would stand the "dare."

But one of Old Bullion's characteristics was that when he said "no," he meant "no," and stuck to it, so the listening and wonder-eyed throng were disappointed in their expectation that they would see more fun.

"Enough is as good as a feast, and I'm no hog," the alcalde replied.

"I said no more in mine, and what I say I stick to."

"And now, what's the meaning of the row that took place up here?" the alcalde continued.

"A messenger came down to my ranch and said there was a riot going on in the plaza, and so I hunted up the chief of police and came hot-foot to stop it."

All eyes were now turned upon the Indian girl, with the exception of the new-comers, and they, perceiving the direction in which the crowd looked, turned and gazed also.

There had been plenty of opportunities during the contest between the Fresh and the alcalde for the girl to have withdrawn without observation, for all of the crowd were too busy watching the gamblers to pay any attention to her, but she had not budged from her position and had bestowed as much attention upon the trial of luck between the two men as any one else.

"This worthy gentleman hyer, can tell you all about it better than I can, I reckon," said the Fresh, "for I got all my information from him."

And Blake indicated Jimsonweed, who swelled out like a turkey-cock at being thus openly brought into general notice.

The saloon-keeper was only too anxious to explain all about the disturbance, and the alcalde listened attentively, paying particular attention when the speaker rehearsed that part of the tale which related to the extremely one-sided fight which had taken place between Lafayette Pickeral and the intruding stranger.

"That is what I meant by saying that I had been elected alcalde of the town," the Fresh explained, when Jimsonweed had finished his recital.

"There wasn't anybody hyer to keep order; the idiots were yelling out to lynch the girl, while she was showing her teeth like a tiger-cat, and in my mind there ain't the least doubt that if the lynching-business had been tried on somebody would have got hurt before they succeeded in stringing the girl up."

The Indian girl stood as erect as a statue and faced the gaze of the throng undauntedly.

"This using a knife in this keener way is pretty serious business," the alcalde remarked, with a wise shake of the head.

Quite a number of the crowd shook their heads in sympathy with the alcalde, but it was plainly to be seen that the violent rage which had existed against the girl had in a great measure abated.

The temper of a crowd is one of the most uncertain things in the world, and there were probably not a dozen men in the throng now who felt any disposition to punish the girl for having been brave enough to punish the ruffian who had attempted to cheat her.

That the man had endeavored to rob her of her money, few in the crowd doubted.

"I suppose we ought to have some sort of a trial," the chief of police suggested. "That is, if the man is badly hurt and there is any danger of his dying."

Then a cry went up from the outskirts of the crowd:

"Hyer's the doctor."

The popular physician of the town of Santa Fé at the time of which we write bore a very peculiar name.

He had come into the district bearing some common, ordinary sort of a name like Smith, Jones or Robinson, but this appellation, whatever it was, did not tarry with him long, and it is doubtful if there were ten men in the place who could recall it.

But the doctor being a tall, angular fellow with the longest and leanest pair of legs ever seen on mortal man, the townsmen with that peculiar aptness for using names that meant something dubbed him Limberlegs, and so nobody ever called him anything but Doctor Limberlegs.

The intelligence that the medical gentleman brought in regard to the condition of the wounded man was favorable to the girl.

"Well, how is he, Doc?" asked Old Bullion, as Limberlegs advanced.

"Oh, he's all right, ain't half as bad as he tries to make out," replied the doctor, who was about as frank a man as could be found anywhere.

"Some galoots, you know, if they get scratched a little will make as much time about it as a sensible man would at losing a leg," the doctor remarked.

"If it had been two inches higher up or lower down it might have made trouble; as it is, about the only effect it will have will be to keep him in the house for four or five weeks."

"Then the man is not dangerously hurt?" the alcalde observed.

"Oh, no, no danger, if he will let whisky alone for awhile until the wound has a chance to heal up. He can take six or eight drinks a day, you know, but no taking on cargo by the wholesale."

This was Limberlegs's idea of letting whisky alone.

He himself was one of the hardest drinkers of the town, but as he had a head of iron, it didn't make much difference. No man in Santa Fé could boast that he had ever seen the doctor the worse for liquor, but the number that had fallen by the wayside in attempting to compete with the doctor in the drinking line was great.

"As long as the man ain't seriously hurt, chief, I reckon there isn't any use of kicking up a fuss about the matter," Old Bullion observed.

"I reckon if you come to cipher the thing down, you'll find the cuss got only what he deserved."

"You kin clear out, Winnemucca, only be keener and don't be so free with your knife another time."

The Indian maid merely nodded, put away her weapons and stalked off without apparently taking any notice of anybody.

"Well, I'll see you later," said Old Bullion, and then, with his daughter, the chief of police and the attendants, retreated.

Jimsonweed sidled up to the Fresh.

"Say, pard, if you haven't located come to my shanty, and I'll treat you well."

"All right. I'd just as lief go to your shebang as anywhere else," the Fresh replied.

So to the Forty Rod Saloon went Blake.

Jimsonweed calculated shrewdly that the presence of the sharp in his place would add to the trade of his establishment, which was probable.

The Fresh retired to rest at once, being given the best room that the house could boast.

He was up betimes in the morning, got his breakfast at the restaurant attached to the saloon, and then started out for a walk.

Into the prairie beyond the town he went, and was strolling along through a bit of broken and irregular country when he was suddenly halted in the most abrupt manner.

"Stop for your life! Another moment and a ball will rend your heart!" was the startling statement.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SHARPSHOOTER.

"HAD I better take to cover?" the Fresh asked, in the most matter-of-fact way in the world, just as if it was a common, everyday occurrence to be told that a single step more would bring him face to face with death.

"Yes, take to the rock to the right; your foe is creeping around the corner of the boulder behind which he is hidden, in order to draw a perfect bead on you when you ascend the little ridge just in front."

"I'm for cover then," and, suiting the action to the word, the Fresh made a dive for the huge rock to his right to which his unknown adviser had referred.

The rock was amply large enough to afford shelter to half a dozen men, and after Blake took advantage of its friendly protection, he began to look around him in order to discover whereabouts the giver of the friendly warning was located.

But sharp as were the eagle-like orbs of Blake he could not make out that there was anybody in his neighborhood, when suddenly the voice spoke again, and the Fresh was able to ascertain now that it came from amid the foliage of a small cluster of scrub oaks which grew on a little hillock some twenty feet to the right.

"The fellow in the ambush does not know what to make of your non-appearance and is beginning to become anxious," said the voice. "I can see him bob up his head every now and then."

"I suppose the best thing I can do is to remain quiet and wait until he comes out of his ambush, and then pounce upon him," Blake observed.

"To ask what he means by lying in wait for you?" said the voice.

"Yes, that's the idea."

"He will be apt to swear that he wasn't doing anything of the kind," the voice replied; "and what proof have you that he intends to harm you if he can?"

"No proof at all, of course, and all I know about the matter comes from you."

"You advised me to stop short, for if I went on I would certainly be shot."

"Advice of that kind always seems to me to be worth acting upon, and so, without knowing who or what you are, I adopted it."

"Do you not recognize my voice?"

"No, I can't say that I do."

"I am the girl on whose behalf you faced the angry mob last night, and unless I am greatly mistaken it is on account of that affair that this man waits for you to-day."

It was the Indian girl, Lute Winnemucca, who spoke, but Blake reflected that it was not strange that he did not recognize her voice, for, to the best of his knowledge and belief, he had never heard it before.

Then, too, now that he came to think over the matter, it certainly seemed to him as if she had said something to the angry mob just as he came upon the scene, but for the life of him he couldn't make up his mind whether she did or did not speak.

Anyway, he did not recognize the voice, whether he had heard her speak or not.

"Is this fellow a pard of the man I whaled last night?" the Fresh asked.

"Yes; he is called Michael Santander, and he is one of the associates of the man whom you handled so roughly last night."

"Let me see; his name is Lafayette Pickeral Laff Pick, for short?"

"Yes; and this man who lies hid yonder is his creature. He is a poor, miserable wretch of a man who only possesses a single gift. He is a wonderful rifle-shot. Not a man for miles around who can equal him."

"How did you happen to discover that this man was lying in ambush?"

"My cave is in yonder hillside, and when I came to look out of my window this morning I saw this man hurrying along and looking behind as if he was on the watch for somebody."

"I knew that he was here at such an hour for no good purpose, and I determined to watch him."

"Well, I'm much obliged to you," the Fresh remarked, in his frank way.

"One of the strongest traits in the Indian race is gratitude. No true child of the prairie and the forest ever forgets a benefit or forgives an injury."

"You stood forward in my behalf at a time when it required rare courage for any one to interfere on behalf of an Indian girl, and while I live I will never forget the service."

"Oh, you mustn't thank me; it's a peculiari-

ty I have. I'm so deuced fresh I can't help interfering in everything that comes along, whether the matter concerns me or not."

"I care not for the motive; I think only of the service!" she exclaimed, quickly.

"Well, to resume my story: I stole forth and followed the man. Every now and then he would turn and appear to be anxiously watching some one who was coming behind him, and as on these occasions he would examine the lock of his rifle with great carefulness, I at once came to the conclusion that he meant mischief.

"This man is no tenderfoot at prairie work, but he is no match for one like myself born and reared upon these plains.

"And as he watched for your coming, and at last selected an ambuscade by the side of the trail so that he could easily kill you, even if he was but one-half the marksman that he is, I, in turn, played the spy upon him.

"You have rather the best of it, and I've no doubt the fellow never even dreamed that he was watched."

And the Fresh chuckled at the idea.

"From this tree I knew I could command a view of the country in all directions, and the nature of the ground is such that it was impossible for this miserable dog to see me climb a tree, and once up in the branches the foliage is so thick that at a hundred yards off the person of any one concealed in the tree is hidden from sight."

"That's true enough, I can't see you even at this short distance," Blake remarked.

"The spy is getting restless; he is moving around the rock," said the girl, who never took her eyes from the ambushed villain for a moment.

"I suppose he is beginning to wonder what has become of me. I ought to have afforded him a shot a good five minutes ago, but you can't always most generally tell how things will turn out in this world, sometimes," observed Blake, with a grimace.

"Now, I don't relish this idea that there's a durned cuss of a sharpshooter a-laying around loose just hungering for the chance to drill a hole in me whenever I take my walks abroad.

"I've got a pair of legs that were brought up to be used, and I don't propose to put in all my time loafing around the streets of Santa Fé; I like to take a quiet five or ten minutes' walk once in a while, and of course it's jest about as certain as death that if this fellow keeps on going a-gunning for me he'll be apt to catch on one of these days, and then it will be good-by to the Fresh of Frisco."

"Now, I will admit that I've had my share of the good things of the world ever since I've been in it, but that is no reason why I should be hurried out of it before my time by this mule-headed son of a rattlesnake.

"He wants to get a crack at me and I am willing to accommodate him, provided I can enjoy the same privilege, and I am willing to give him what most folks would consider to be considerable odds; I'll put my revolver against his rifle."

"That is giving him a decided advantage," the girl observed.

"Not so much as it appears at the first blush," the Fresh responded.

"In the first place, of course, you understand that I don't calculate to fight him at a distance beyond revolver-range.

"It would be madness for me to undertake to put my revolver against his rifle if the distance was so great that my pistol would not cover it.

"No, I calculate to have the leeble difficulty come off when the distance between will not exceed a couple of hundred feet, then if I ain't able to plug him with my self-acting tools before he can get a chance to put his rifle to his shoulder to draw a bead on me, I'm not the man I take myself to be.

"In such a fight as I am talking about the man with the self-acting tools—a single pull to lift the hammer and let her go—is not going to be left very badly when opposed to a fellow who has to cock his rifle, bring it to his shoulder and draw a bead before he can send the leaden ball."

"Yes, yes, I can understand that," said the Indian girl, and this was true enough, for what she did not know about weapons was not worth knowing.

"How is this fellow with the pistol?" asked Blake, abruptly.

"A poor shot; he is good only with the rifle."

"I don't bear the rascal any malice, although he is trying to do his best to transplant me to another sphere, but then the poor hound may not be able to help himself. I calculate, however, to fix him so that after I have got through with the rascal, it will be a mighty long while before he will be able to do much damage with his rifle.

"After the cruel war has ended, they will have to find some other name for him than the Sharpshooter, because it won't fit him at all.

"Maybe they may call him the Sharpshooter-that-used-to-be, but that is a kinder long-winded handle, and the boys would never take to it in the world."

"He has apparently made up his mind to return up the trail!" exclaimed the girl. "He

has risen from his ambush behind the rock, stepped out into the path, and now stands there listening."

CHAPTER IX.

A SKIRMISH.

"I SEE his game!" the Fresh observed. "He is listening to see if he can hear the sound of my footsteps.

"He can't exactly make up his mind that I have turned about, and thinks it possible I am still advancing, but loitering on the way."

The Indian girl was watching the movements of the ambushed foe from her perch in the treetop with the eye of a hawk.

"He is motionless now, apparently debating what is the best course for him to pursue," announced Lute Winnemucca.

"Oh, if the varmint would only make up his mind to come back after me, so I could get a fair chance to try my little scheme upon him!" the Fresh exclaimed, slipping his revolvers from their holsters, and carefully examining them so as to be sure they were in perfect order.

When we introduced Jackson Blake to our readers we remarked that, contrary to the usual custom on the frontier, he displayed no weapons upon his person, and that the citizens, while noting this, were of the opinion that the stranger was well heeled for all of that.

And so he was.

Underneath his vest a broad leather belt girded in his supple waist, and in their holsters, suspended to this belt, hung a pair of as fine self-cocking revolvers as the cunning hand of the master artisan had ever furnished for mortal use.

An eight-inch bowie-knife, securely fastened in a leather scabbard, kept the revolvers company.

So, if any misguided individual had picked a quarrel with the Fresh under the belief that he was an unarmed man and could be easily handled, the surprise that Jackson Blake would have given him would have been of the most intense description.

"He is advancing," said the girl.

"Aha! that's good; that's exactly what I want," the Fresh cried, in glee.

"Yes, he is stealing forward like an Indian brave on the war-trail, his body bent forward, his rifle ready in his hands, and all senses strained to catch the signs of your approach."

"Oh, he won't catch it; it will catch him, and so suddenly that he'll think he's been struck by a cyclone," observed the Fresh, with grim humor.

"Turn about is only fair play, you know. He calculated to surprise me in a way that would be likely to make my hair stand on end and now I reckon I'll give him a dose of his own medicine.

"He ought not to complain, for what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander."

"I should judge from the way he is stealing forward that it will not be an easy matter for you to distinguish his approach until he is right on you, but then that will only make his surprise the greater," the Indian girl remarked.

"Oh, no; we must fix it in some other way than that," Blake exclaimed quickly.

"I want to give the rascal some show for his money, you know, although he didn't calculate to give me much.

"If I should jump out at him so that we wouldn't be over a dozen yards apart, the advantage would be all on my side, because it would be a miserable revolver-shot that couldn't plug his man at such close quarters as that.

"But if I allow him thirty or forty yards, it would look as if he was having a fair shake, and no mistake, although between me and you and the bed-post, it's an awful sell on the cuss, for I'm such an expert revolver-shot that I will back myself to hit ninety apples out of a hundred tossed in the air at a distance of thirty yards, and that's a deuced sight harder task than to drill a hole through a human at that distance."

"If you can do that, there is no man in Santa Fé who can equal you," the girl remarked.

"I am called as good a shot as there is in the Territory, and I have never yet been beaten in a match, but I would not dare to attempt to perform any such feat as that."

"I can do it ninety times out of a hundred, and I would be willing to back that say-so with my life!" the Fresh asserted, positively.

"You are, then, a most wonderful shot, indeed."

"Yes; it's a gift I have; if I was inclined to blow my own bugle I might say that when you get right well acquainted with me you'll be pretty apt to discover that I've got two or three mighty wonderful qualities; but there, I won't lay on the whitewash too thick, or maybe it will be apt to make you sick."

"You are the bravest man that ever trod the soil of Santa Fé!" exclaimed the girl abruptly, and with startling earnestness.

"And the most generous, too; there's not one man out of ten thousand who would have dared to face that howling multitude, crazy for the blood of the Indian girl, as you did last night, and I shall never forget the service, though I should live to be a thousand years old!"

"Hold on, hold on!" exclaimed the Fresh. "I rather think you are laying it on with a white-wash brush now."

"No, it is the simple truth, nothing more."

"Spare my blushes!" ejaculated Blake.

All this time the girl had not for a single instant neglected to keep diligent watch of the movements of the man who had been ambushed by the side of the trail.

He was fully a thousand yards off when he commenced his advance, and he came on in the most cautious manner, stopping every now and then to listen, so as to be sure not to come upon the prey he sought unexpectedly.

It was his desire to surprise, not to be surprised.

"He has gone over about one-half the distance now," commented the maid.

"Wait until he gets within forty yards of me, and when he does, imitate the note of a bird; I presume you are expert at all that sort of thing."

"The Indian girl was born on the prairie, and why should she not be able to talk to the beautiful creatures who have sung to her ever since she was able to understand what the song of a bird was?" responded the girl.

"Hallo, hallo," muttered the Fresh to himself. "She's a-d-d-ping right down into poetry now, and to think that this gal can play poker good enough to hold her own with almost any gambler that ever flipped a card, and is tiger enough to almost carve a critter into mince-meat, because he reckoned that as she was a woman he could rob her of the money she had fairly won.

"Durn me if this hyer human nature ain't a most wonderful thing, and the longer you live in this world the more you find out."

"Be prepared," cautioned the girl, in a suppressed tone. "He is so near now that five minutes will bring him within thirty yards."

"How's the country, open, or is there a lot of bowlders behind which he can dodge?"

"Open! there is not a rock within thirty feet of him big enough to afford shelter for a wolf."

"That's just exactly the kind of lay-out that I am looking for!" exclaimed the Fresh, with a chuckle.

"I like to catch these Mister Smarties in their own traps.

"When they have the thing tried on them two or three times they understand how it is themselves!"

"Be prepared, he is near!" continued the Indian maid, in a tone just loud enough to reach the ears of the Fresh.

Blake was possessed of remarkably acute ears, but though he was listening with all his might, he could not detect a single sound to denote that a human was near.

"This fellow is a scout from Scouterville, or else I should be able to get onto him," he muttered, as he crouched behind a giant bowlder, which completely concealed him, ready to spring out and confront the cowardly foe who had waited for him in ambush, with the intention of shooting him down like a dog without giving him a chance for his life.

As he watched all of a sudden a faint sound came to his ears; it was the noise made by a piece of dirt crumbling to pieces under the feet of the approaching man; but the noise was so slight that if the Fresh's ears had not been stretched to their fullest extent he never would have been able to catch the sound.

Every nerve and muscle in Blake's body was strung to its utmost tension.

And now on the air rose the low notes of a song-bird in the branches of the oak, calling to its mate.

It was the signal of the Indian girl, and yet so complete was the imitation, so near to nature, that for a moment Blake himself, although warned and on the watch for it, was almost deceived into the belief that it was truly the note of some bird hidden within the leafy embraces of the tree.

'Twas but for a second, though, that the Fresh allowed himself to be deceived, and then, with his revolver in hand, but the arm extended at full length by his side so that the weapon was not plainly visible, Blake stepped from the shelter of the bowlder into the path.

The surprise was complete.

The Sharpshooter was a little, thin, dried-up sort of a fellow, with an evil face.

He looked exactly like what he really was—a mean, miserable scamp.

Complete and unexpected as was the surprise, yet it only took a moment for the fellow to recover from it.

Quick as a flash he brought his rifle up to his shoulder; it was already cocked; that murder was in his heart was plainly apparent, for Blake had merely stepped from behind the rock into the trail without making the slightest hostile sign, his revolver, as we have said, being pressed against his leg so as to be almost completely concealed from sight.

But quick as was the action of the stranger, the Fresh of Frisco was quicker still.

His hand came up and the flame of the pistol flashed forth just as the weapon rose above the level of his waist.

The rifle of the other spoke not.

CHAPTER X.
THE SURPRISE.

The man staggered back and a groan of pain was wrung from his lips.

The bullet of the sharp had struck home.

He essayed to bring his rifle to his shoulder, but the effort cost him so much pain that it forced from him a fearful groan.

Meanwhile Blake remained perfectly still, gazing upon his antagonist with a face as impassive as that of a marble statue.

The Indian girl, from her covert in the tree-top, was watching the scene with the most intense interest.

That the Fresh had inflicted a severe wound upon the man who had been so anxious to play the part of a secret assassin was apparent, and yet it did not seem to disable him; that is, he was still able to stand and was furious to avenge the hurt which he had received.

The revolver-shot had struck him in the shoulder, cutting through the muscles and practically rendering the arm useless.

The Sharpshooter hadn't anything of the gameness of the bull-dog about him.

He was one of the kind of men who would much rather run than fight unless all the advantages were on his side.

But in the present instance he was goaded to desperation by the wound he had received, and was fairly frantic for revenge.

Finding that he was unable to use the right hand he grasped his rifle with his left and endeavored to bring it to his shoulder.

Blake was on the watch, however, and before the secret assassin could succeed in discharging his weapon, again his revolver spoke.

With a fearful groan the now disabled man was compelled to drop the rifle, for the bullet had pierced the left shoulder.

He was completely helpless and at the mercy of the man whom he had attempted to kill.

"Now, then, my gentle pard, I reckon I've got you exactly where I want you!" the Fresh exclaimed, advancing with rapid steps toward his opponent, brandishing his pistol in an extremely menacing way.

To use the Western expression it was plain that the Fresh "meant business," and the Sharpshooter, quick to perceive this fact, began to tremble in dismay.

As we have said there wasn't anything of the bull-dog about him, and now that he realized that he was completely in the power of the man whom he had attempted to kill, his craven heart shook with fear.

"Mercy, mercy!" he cried, and then sunk upon his knees in abject terror.

"You craven hound!" cried Jackson Blake, in utter contempt, "why should I spare your life—your miserable, worthless life? Of what good is it to you or to anybody else?"

"Oh, I'm not fit to die," the trembling coward moaned.

"And did you think I was fit to die that you were so anxious to hurry me out of the world?"

"It was all a mistake," the wretch whined.

"A mistake, eh?" cried the Fresh, incredulously.

"Yes, you were not the man at all."

"You were waiting for some man then?"

"Oh, no, I wasn't," stammered the poltroon, who saw that he had been betrayed into an unguarded admission.

"What did you mean then when you said that I wasn't the man and that it was a mistake?" questioned Blake, sternly.

"Why, there's a man in Santa Fé that has a grudge against me, and as I heered he had allowed he was going to kill me on sight I've been on the lookout for him ever since I was warned."

"Oh, and you thought that I was this enemy, eh?"

"Yes, and that's the reason I went and pulled my gun on you so quick."

"That's a likely story!" exclaimed the Fresh, in supreme contempt.

"Had you any reason to suppose you were likely to run across this party to-day and in this place?"

"Oh, well, I didn't know; of course ever since I have been warned that this fellow was out a-gunning for me I have kept my eyes open, mighty wide, and have allers been on the lookout."

"Oh, bosh!" cried Blake, impatiently.

"Don't try to fool me with any such yarn as that!"

"You came stealing along with your rifle in your hands all ready for action. You showed plainly enough by your movements that you were on the lookout for some one."

"You are a snake in the grass, and now that I have a chance to place my heel upon your head, don't you think I would be an idiot if I didn't do it?"

"You dogged me from the town this morning, played the spy upon my footsteps, and laid in wait for the purpose of murdering me in cold blood."

"It isn't of the least bit of use for you to deny this, for it is the truth."

There was a rustling amid the leaves of the old oak tree, and then the Indian girl descended to the ground.

"You know that it is the truth!" she cried, indignantly. "You trailed this man from the

town, and then ambushed yourself, so that you might kill him as he came by your hiding-place."

"I saw it all from the top of yonder tree, miserable wretch that you are!"

Blake leveled his revolver directly at the head of the scoundrel, and the movement made the assassin shriek in terror.

"For the love of Heaven do not murder me in cold blood!" he cried.

"You have maimed me for months, for you have shot me through both shoulders so that I will not be able to use my rifle."

"Are you not satisfied? Spare me, and I will confess who set me on to attack you."

"Well, on that condition I will spare your life, for I really don't think you are fit to die—not fit to live either, for that matter," replied Blake, sternly.

"Go ahead with your tale; who engaged you to attack me?"

"The Chief of the Bloodsuckers."

"Well, that doesn't give me much information. Who is the Chief of the Bloodsuckers?"

The other shook his head.

"Do you mean to say that you don't know?" asked the Fresh, in surprise.

"No man knows," was the reply.

"How is that?"

"The chief is always disguised. He is tall, with his face all covered over with hair, and over the upper part of his features he wears a red half-mask, so that it is impossible for any one to see what he looks like."

"I was in my cabin last night, and had neglected to bar the door, and all of a sudden, without any warning, it opened, and in came the Chief of the Bloodsuckers."

"I knew him immediately, of course, although it was the first time I had seen him, but then I have often heard him described."

"Yes, from your description I should imagine such a man would be easily recognized," the Fresh observed.

"I cried out that he was wasting his time, for I had nothing worth stealing."

"He replied that he had not come to take money, but to pay some, and without more words he promptly offered me a thousand dollars if I would put you out of the way."

"I am poor, a thousand dollars is a great deal of money, and I was fool enough to accept."

"He paid me the money promptly, but warned me that if I did not succeed in accomplishing the task he would come and take the gold away again, and that if I valued my life I must not spend any of it until after I had done the job."

Blake had watched the face of the man intently during the delivery of the story, thinking he could detect from the expression upon it whether he was speaking the truth or not, and when the Sharpshooter had finished, wild and improbable as the recital seemed, yet the Fresh felt satisfied that he had spoken the truth.

"Well, upon my word, I am bothered!" Blake exclaimed. "I don't know anything about this Bloodsucker chief, nor do I understand why he should want to have me killed."

"I reckon he ain't much of a bloodsucker, though, or else he would do the job himself, instead of hiring a bravo."

"But this thing will be a warning to you, I think, not to get mixed up in any such scrape again. You can get out; vamose as soon as you like."

The fellow did not stand upon the order of his going, but departed in hot haste.

"This is a regular mystery," the Fresh observed.

"And the more I think about it the greater the puzzle becomes. I think I shall have to make it my business to discover who this Bloodsucker chief is, and perhaps after I get through with him he will not be as much of a bloodsucker as he was before."

"There is a regular band, and some of their outrages have been fearful ones," the girl remarked.

"The man with whom you quarreled last night and his companions are believed to be connected with these outlaws, but no one knows for certain."

"Well, I reckon I'll have to clean these Bloodsuckers out," the Fresh remarked, in a thoughtful sort of way.

"I'm always poking my nose in something that don't concern me, but in this case it is the Bloodsuckers that have begun the game, and, hang me, if I don't play my side of it for all it is worth!"

"Are you going toward Santa Fé?"

"Yes; my cave abode is in that direction."

"We will walk on together, then."

On they went through the broken country to the barren plain, and when they were in the middle of this sterile spot they were amazed to see a band of six horsemen ride out from amid the shelter of a timber-island, a half-mile or so to the northward, and make directly for them.

"This looks like business," Blake remarked.

CHAPTER XI.

AN ATTACK IN FORCE.

THERE was reason for the remark made by

Blake, for after quitting the shelter of the timber the horsemen rode directly for the two traversing the sandy plain.

If they did not come on a hostile intent they were certainly acting in a strange manner.

The two halted immediately upon noting the appearance of the strangers, and as both of them were gifted with eagle-like eyes it did not take them long to discover what manner of men were these who had made their appearance in so mysterious and unexpected a manner.

"They were all dressed exactly alike, dark pantaloons, thrust into huge boots reaching above the knees, blue flannel shirts and large, black, broad-brimmed hats."

Their waists were girted in with strong leather belts which supported a fine array of weapons.

A brace of revolvers and an eight-inch bowie-knife each man carried, but none of the party appeared to be armed with a rifle, a fact which the Fresh noted with a great deal of satisfaction.

"Do you see that none of them seems to have any gun bigger than a revolver?" he remarked to his companion as the horsemen approached near enough for him to discover how they were armed.

"Yes, and it is fortunate for us too," the Indian girl replied.

"Oh, there isn't the least doubt about that!" Blake exclaimed.

"If they had rifles against our revolvers we should be gone coons, for all they would have to do would be to keep just beyond the range of our fire and pick us off at their leisure."

"But as it is, Jack is as good as his master, and though the odds are three to one, I reckon we can continue to hold our own against them."

"These are the Bloodsuckers!" cried the girl, after taking a good, long look at the strangers.

"Yes, they seem to answer the description, and they are all as alike as two peas, with the exception that some of them are a little bigger than the others; but they are all dressed exactly alike, all have long, black hair and flowing beards."

"And all wear a black half-mask over the upper part of their faces," added the girl, the horsemen by this time having approached near enough to enable her to discover this fact.

"Oh, it's this mysterious outlaw band, sure enough," the Fresh remarked.

"And they are after me, too; there isn't any doubt about that, though what I have ever done to incur their enmity is a mystery, seeing that I am a stranger in this neighborhood."

"It may be though that the suspicion to which you referred was correct—that is, that the bully whose comb I was compelled to cut last night is one of the gang."

"If that is a fact it is easy to understand why they want to go for me."

"It is probably the truth; they set the Sharpshooter on to murder you, and having a suspicion that he might not be able to accomplish the task, laid in wait for you themselves."

"I shouldn't be surprised if you have hit upon the truth," Blake observed.

"We'll soon know, for they're nearly within hailing distance."

The Fresh and the girl had halted immediately upon perceiving the horsemen, and their first movement, after ascertaining that the newcomers were apparently advancing with hostile intent, was to draw their revolvers.

Although, as our hero had observed, the odds were three to one, yet it was not by any means a settled fact that the horsemen would be able to get the best of the fight, although the advantage of the odds was on their side.

Two better revolver shots than Blake and the Indian girl it would be difficult to find anywhere, and the Fresh had had so much experience in skirmishes of the character of the one that now seemed near at hand, that he was fully equal to three, if not to a half a dozen ordinary men.

The Indian girl, too, despite the fact that she was a woman, was no mean antagonist, for the refining influence of civilization to which she had been subjected had not in the least tamed the savageness of her nature.

She had been carefully educated—could speak English as fluently as though there was not a drop of red blood in her veins, but this varnish of civilization was only on the surface, and beneath it was the wild, untamed barbarian, fully assavage in all respects as any red-skinned warrior whose greatest aspiration was to deck his person with the scalp-locks of his enemies.

When the horsemen came within five hundred yards they halted, and one of them rode out a little in advance of the others.

This was evidently the chief of the party, although there wasn't anything about him by means of which he could be distinguished from the rest.

In fact, the whole idea of the disguise the horsemen wore seemed to be to prevent one from being told from the others.

But as this man had evidently advanced with the idea of being spokesman for the rest, it seemed probable that he was the leader of the party.

The man rode forward some ten feet in advance of the rest, and then reining in his steed,

held up his hand as if to attract the attention of the Fresh and his companion.

"All right, stranger; we see you!" exclaimed the irrepressible Blake, never able to keep quiet, if there was a chance for him to get a word in edgeways.

"Go ahead with your bird's-egging; our ears are open and our comprehension is big."

"Young man, do you know who we are?" exclaimed the horseman, gruffly, evidently not pleased by the flippant tone of our hero.

"Stranger, you have got me where my hair is short," Blake replied.

"I do not know you, nor any of the rest of your gang—wouldn't know you from a side of sole-leather, not even if I fell over you; but one thing I can say, and that is, you and your pards don't need to be introduced to me half as bad as you do to the barber."

"You want to go for a shaving chap as quickly as possible, for with your long hair and beards you look more like wild men of the woods than anything else."

"You talk too much, and if you're not careful you may have an inch or two of your tongue cut off one of these days!" cried the stranger, evidently exasperated by the coolness of the other.

"Oh, cutting off an inch or two wouldn't do any good," retorted Blake.

"You'll have to slice the whole concern to keep it from wagging, for that is the kind of a tongue it is."

"I guess we'll have to lay you out, and that is the way to settle the matter," replied the horseman.

"Well, that is about the most likely way, but whether it can be done or not remains to be seen."

"I reckon you won't find it as easy as rolling off a log."

"Oh, you're too fresh!" cried the other, angrily.

"Tell me something I don't know," retorted Blake.

"I've had that said to me a thousand or more times in the last ten years, and I'm getting sick of it."

"That's the stalest kind of a yarn to me now. Give me a rest on that, and strike something new."

"Did you ever hear of the Bloodsuckers?" asked the horseman, sternly, evidently intending by his manner to impress Blake with a sense of awe, but, as the reader doubtless understands, he might as well have attempted to move a mountain by the power of his voice as to produce any impression upon the redoubtable Fresh of Frisco.

"Oh, yes; I've heard of all kinds of Bloodsuckers—many kinds as you can shake a stick at in a week."

"All beats, the whole gang, of course; but what are you driving at, anyhow?"

"You are a stranger in these parts," said the horseman, in a deep-toned, solemn voice.

"Oh, yes; but that state of affairs won't last long, you know. I'm the slickest fellow in the world to get acquainted."

"You just give me time—wait until I have been here a week, and I'll make myself so particularly agreeable to you Santa Féites that there won't be a man, woman or child in the town who wouldn't be willing to swear that they have known me for the last twenty years."

By this time the stranger began to understand that he was only wasting time in endeavoring to make any impression upon our hero by mere words alone, and that in a conversation of this kind the Fresh was more than able to hold his own with any man in existence.

So the horseman came down to business at once.

"We are a band of regulators known as the Bloodsuckers, and we kinder run things in this region to suit ourselves!" the man declared.

"We've got an idee inter our noddles that we can spare a man about your size, and so we give you fair warning to git up and dust out as lively as possible, or else we'll have to make it so warm for you that you'll be apt to think Santa Fé is the hottest place this side of the infernal regions."

"Get up and dust?" observed Blake, reflectively.

"That is what I said."

"And if I don't?"

"We'll go for you red-hot!"

CHAPTER XII. THE FIGHT.

THERE was a dead silence for a few moments, the horsemen as motionless upon their steeds as so many grim statues, and the Fresh apparently buried in reflection, while the Indian girl grasped her revolvers and gazed upon the disguised men with the angry light of war shining in her dark eyes.

Then all of a sudden this serious expression upon the face of Blake changed to a whimsical one.

"How hot is red-hot?" he demanded.

This absurd question roused the anger of the horsemen, and each and every man grasped his weapons, as though eager to shed the blood of the reckless jester.

"Do you dare to laugh at us, the Bloodsuckers?" cried the chief of the outlaw band, in a rage.

"Of course I laugh at you and your foolishness!" Blake replied, contemptuously.

"Bah! do you think you can frighten a man with your long hair, your false beards and your idiotic name?"

"You may be able to scare children, but when it comes to men the trick can't be worked for a cent."

"Bloodsuckers are you? Well, I'm a blood-letter, and that's the kind of a hair-pin you'll find me!"

"Go on about your business, or I'll try some pistol practice that will be apt to empty some of your saddles before I get through."

"We'll give you four-and-twenty hours to leave Santa Fé!" fairly roared the Bloodsucker chief, evidently wild with rage at being thus openly defied.

"I wouldn't ask for four-and-twenty minutes if I had any idea of getting out!" the Fresh retorted, in defiance.

"But as it is, I reckon I'll need about four-and-twenty-years, and then I won't be in a hurry to vamose the ranch."

"Your death will lie at your own door!" warned the horseman.

"I'm not dead yet," Blake retorted.

"And if you have made any arrangements for my funeral, I advise you to run right away and stop the whole business; I ain't ready to head the procession yet, but if you are really anxious for a funeral I'll give you a chance to ride in the first coach in about two shakes of a lamb's tail, you miserable, no-souled, white-livered, hairy-faced cuss!"

At this bold defiance the horsemen could not restrain their anger, and with loud cries of rage they plucked forth their revolvers from their holsters and brandished them in the air.

With a gesture, though, the Bloodsucker chief restrained his followers.

"Wait a moment, boys!" he cried.

"We've got the galoot foul—he can't escape us, and there isn't any need of being in a hurry."

Then he addressed the girl:

"See hyer, Lute Winnemucca, we ain't got any quarrel with you—this man is the antelope that we're after—so you can git up and git as soon as you like."

"I haven't the least objection to that," Blake hastened to say.

"There isn't the slightest reason in the world why you should be mixed up in this affair, and since these ridiculous-looking guys are willing to allow you to depart, go then and thank your lucky stars for being able to get away from six as big scoundrels as ever cheated a white jail."

Again the Bloodsuckers swore loudly at the insolence of the man whom they had marked for their prey, and would have immediately advanced to give battle if they had not been restrained by their leader, who was anxious to get the Indian girl to depart.

Lute Winnemucca's reputation as a pistol-shot was great, and the outlaw chief would far rather have her out of the fight than in it.

"You dared to speak for the Indian girl when the white dogs came yelping at her heels, hungry for her blood!" she cried.

"And there is not a single drop of that blood that is not at your command; and as for you, miserable scoundrels!" she continued, addressing the disguised men, "I laugh at your threats and despise your commands."

"Dare to attack us and your blood will be upon your own heads!"

"All right!" yelled the outlaw.

"If you want war you shall have it to your heart's content!"

"String out, boys, and ride 'em down. Shoot to kill, too, and we can have two funerals instead of one!"

Obedient to the command the horsemen separated and at a brisk trot set out to inclose their destined victims in a circle.

They did not attempt to close in on their prey until they had completely surrounded the pair, being careful not to approach nearer than they had been at the first.

Then when the circle was complete the chief gave the order for the attack.

"Sail in, Bloodsuckers, and wipe 'em out!" he cried.

With loud yells the ruffians put spurs to their horses and charged upon the two strange partners who had placed themselves back to back and with a revolver in each hand waited the onset with perfect calmness.

"Don't be in a hurry," Blake cautioned, as the ruffians were dashing on to the attack.

"Don't throw a shot away; wait until you are sure of your man and then plug him so he will stay plugged for keeps."

"The chances are really in our favor, for it would take an extra good pistol-shot to do any damage firing on horseback with the animal plunging forward as the brutes are doing."

"And if we hit the horses and disable them it will be about the same as if we had shot the rider," the girl observed, perfectly cool and self-possessed.

"Oh, yes, a well-aimed shot in the shoulder would be apt to bring the brutes down on their knees and then the rider would surely catch a tumble over the horse's head which would be apt to put him out of the fight for a time at least, and that is all we want, for if they don't ride us down at the first charge, it will be all up with them."

These few words had been rapidly exchanged, and by the time that Blake had come to the end of the speech he judged the moment for action had arrived.

"That fellow on the roan pony is my mutton, I reckon!" he exclaimed, and with the word up came the revolver in his right hand, and its sharp, quick report vibrated over the sandy plain.

"Every bullet hath its billet," says the old saying, and in this case the adage was true enough, for the leaden ball went straight to the heart of the desperado.

With a convulsive groan he straightened up in the saddle and then fell headlong out of it.

Hardly had the echoes of the shot died away when, with the regularity and precision of machinery, up came the other arm, and again the white puff of smoke burst from the shining tube and the deadly ball went hurtling on its way.

This time the timely swerving of the horse of the man by whom Blake had fired saved the life of the rider, but the ball took effect in his right arm though, causing him to drop the revolver, which he was brandishing, as if it had suddenly become red-hot.

On her part the Indian girl had fired two shots, and the damage done was equally as great as that occasioned by Blake's pistol-practice.

Her first ball had entered the shoulder of one of the horses, bringing the brute to its knees, and causing the rider to take a flight through the air over his head, and when he landed the shock completely demoralized him, for he came down upon his head and shoulders and the concussion stunned him.

Her second shot was a fatal one, for the leaden missile crashed through the brain of the man at whom it was aimed and thus abruptly sent him to his long home.

The moment that Blake had fired, the Bloodsuckers had returned the compliment, but their bullets had flown wide of the mark, for, as the Fresh had observed, no ordinary marksman could hope to hit an object as small as a man at such a distance from the saddle of a rapidly-moving horse.

The attack came to a sudden termination.

The death of two of the outlaws, and the downfall of the other pair, thus wiping out the odds and making an even thing of it, struck a chill to the heart of the outlaw chief and his sole remaining companion.

They were approaching from opposite sides. The chief advancing upon Blake and the other upon the Indian girl; but when their companions were so unceremoniously "knocked out," with a yell of dismay, actuated by a common impulse, they swerved off to the northward and fled at the best speed of which their horses were capable.

"Hallo, hallo! come back!" the Fresh cried, at the top of his lungs.

"You haven't got through with your contract yet."

The outlaws never heeded the taunt, though, but fled at headlong speed, and never drew rein until they were out of sight in the distance.

"Now let's see whether there is any life in these fellows or not," Blake observed.

"And keep your eyes open, for if any of these fellows is able to use a weapon, he'd be likely to go for you without warning."

They found, as we have stated, two of the ruffians dead, one severely wounded, and the other was unharmed, except by the shock of the fall, which had momentarily stunned him.

Blake removed the wigs, the false beards and the black masks, with the idea that the Indian girl, being well acquainted with the citizens of the town, would be able to recognize them.

But she could not, for all four were strangers.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CHANCE FOR FUN.

BLAKE took the precaution to remove all the weapons in the possession of the outlaws, and by the aid of a leather cord tied them all together.

"To the victors belong the spoils," he remarked, after this operation was completed.

"We'll confiscate these weapons to pay the expenses of the campaign."

The two fellows who had been deposited upon the ground in so unceremonious a manner, recovered their senses almost simultaneously, and the expression of dismay which appeared upon their faces as they sat up and looked around was really laughable.

Near at hand were two of their comrades, cold in the embrace of death, and afar off on the prairie were the other two, hurrying from the scene of the conflict as fast as their horse's legs could carry them.

Their weapons were in the possession of the victors, and that they were to be called to anac-

count for their share in this proceeding was plainly apparent.

"Now, pard, since you have had your fun, it is about time I had a little," the Fresh remarked, in a tone of voice which plainly suggested that he meant business.

"Fun!" exclaimed the ruffian who had been so unceremoniously pitched over his horse's head; "well, it may be fun, but I'm durned if I want any more of it."

"And I've got enough to last me for a dog's age," growled his companion, nursing his wounded arm.

The conversation that ensued between the two outlaws and the Fresh of Frisco is not of sufficient importance to warrant its being detailed at length.

Blake desired to discover from the men why the attack had been made upon him and who the leader of the Bloodsuckers really was, but on both points he was baffled.

The ruffians begged for mercy, acknowledged that they were in a tight place and readily agreed to tell all they knew on condition that their lives were spared.

To this Blake agreed, but unfortunately their information didn't amount to anything.

They were from Taos; there had been four of them, including the two men who had fallen in the fight; they had arrived at Santa Fé a little after midnight and had gone into camp just outside the town.

They acknowledged, without attempting to mince matters, that they had been run out of Taos and had arrived at Santa Fé about dead broke, and while they were sitting around the fire which they had kindled, debating what the next move was to be and wondering in what direction they had better skirmish for a stake, two horsemen had ridden up and entered into conversation with them.

Two men with long black hair and abundant beards.

The two were the chief of the Bloodsuckers and the other ruffian who had succeeded in escaping with him.

The outlaw chief, finding that the strangers were "strapped," told them that he reckoned he could show them a way to make a "raise" if they wasn't particular in regard to what they did.

The men were not particular, and so a bargain was made.

They were to receive so much money for attacking and killing a certain party whom the spokesman of the two was to point out.

The strangers provided the disguises and the attack was made, and that was all the two knew about the matter.

Of course when the wigs and beards were brought forward for their use they understood that the two men were also disguised, though previous to this they had not had any suspicion that such was the fact.

When Blake discovered that the two had gone into this venture merely on strict commercial principles, just as in the olden days soldiers of fortune sold their swords to the highest bidder, and that they hadn't the least bit of malice toward him in the world, he relented and restored to the men their arms, and even bestowed upon them a five-dollar gold coin apiece.

"There's a stake to start you, and don't get caught in such a scrape as this again," he said.

"You'll find plenty of work if you choose to look for it, and if you'll take my advice have no more to do with men that hide their faces."

The fellows were very grateful, and both protested that they would gladly return the favor some time.

Then Blake and the Indian girl went on their way toward the town, leaving the others to follow at their leisure.

A mile or so further on in the first range of hills from the river the Indian girl showed Blake where her cave apartment was situated.

"At any time you wish to see me," she said, "by leaving a message here it will be sure to reach me if I am not at home."

"Write a line and slip it under the door."

"I shall not forget," he replied.

"And now good-by," and she tendered her hand as she spoke.

"Good-by, and remember that I consider myself in your debt for this service which you have rendered me to-day, for if it had not been for your warning I should assuredly have walked into the trap laid for me by that miserable Sharpshooter, and have been put into a condition to be food for worms by this time."

"You saved my life and at the risk of your own. I saved your life, but encountered no peril myself, so the account is not even yet, and I consider that I am still in your debt, but I will do my utmost to pay it off."

Blake attempted to argue the girl out of this belief, but he soon discovered that it was an utterly impossible task, and so he wisely gave it up.

Another warm clasp of the hand was exchanged, and then the pair parted.

Winemucca going up the river toward her cave and Blake taking his way back to Santa Fé.

Acting on the invitation of the host of the Forty Rod Saloon, the Fresh had taken up his

quarters there. He had a small bedroom in the rear of the house on the second floor, and like all the rest of the guests, took his meals in the restaurant on the ground floor.

When he arrived at the hotel he had a fine appetite, and so did full justice to the breakfast.

Then, when the meal had been dispatched, finding that the host had received some St. Louis papers of a late date he sat down to enjoy the news.

Pretty soon Jimsonweed sidled up to him and took a chair by his side.

"Say, you play a pretty good game at almost anything, don't you?" he asked.

"Well, yes, without any egotism I suppose I may say I'm able to hold my end up as a general rule."

"Thar's a big game played hyer every night up to Spanish John's."

"Spanish John, eh?"

"Yes, a regular first-class shebang. The Golden Monté Palace, it's called."

"That's an attractive name, but I reckon the place takes in more money than it ever pays out."

"In course; cert; you bet! How could the place run if it didn't?"

"That's true as Gospel. Your head is level there."

"It's a bang-up place, and no mistake. Why, it's got a grand piano that cost a cool thousand dollars in St. Louis, 'sides the freight onto it out hyar."

"That's a pretty big thing in this country, and ought to draw like hot cakes."

"Oh, it does; but it's hard work to keep a piano-player. Spanish John has brought out over a dozen since he got the music-box."

"The sharps who are good for anything nda kin rattle music out of the consarn don't count kindly to the Golden Palace, as a rule; it's too rich for their blood, as it were, and they clear out."

"I see; kinder high-toned roosters."

"Yes, sorter; and the chaps that are willing to stay are either drunkards that you can't depend upon or duffers w'ot ain't no good."

"Well, that's rough on Spanish John."

"And he pays a good price, too; twenty-five chucks a week and the grub."

"Very liberal, indeed."

"Oh, it's a bang-up place. Now, if you keer to go up there to-night, I don't doubt you kin pick up some money."

"Thar's a chance there for almost any kind of game. Thar's a monte room, a faro room, a keno dive, chuck-a-luck tables and a half a dozen private card-rooms for poker parties."

"The accommodations are really palatial."

"Oh, they are bang-up," the host declared.

"Ther's been a good deal of talk around town this morning 'bout how you skinned the alcalde last night, and if you're game for fun you kin win a small fortune from the sharps to-night, for they are all a-dying to get at you."

"I'll be on hand, never fear, and if you hear any more talk, you just say quietly that I'll be up to the Golden Monté Palace to-night ready to try conclusions with any sharp in town who thinks he knows how to play cards."

"All right, I will."

And Jimsonweed sauntered off to tell the "boys" that the stranger was going to "hold the fort" that night at Spanish John's.

Blake read the papers and took a stroll around town, and so occupied the forenoon.

After dinner he went up-stairs to his room, and lying down, refreshed himself with a good four hours' sleep, so that at supper-time he was in splendid condition to go through a night's campaign.

After supper he lit a cigar and strolled down the street, enjoying the balmy evening air, calculating to kill time until about nine o'clock as very little business in the amusement line began until then.

Blake strolled along clear to the outskirts of the town, and there suddenly came to the conclusion that his footsteps were being dogged.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WARNING.

It was a bright moonlight night therefore it was an easy matter for the Fresh to detect that some one was playing the spy upon him.

As far as he could make out, it was a medium-sized, slenderly-built man—more boy than man really, and from the peculiar way in which he was acting, Blake was forced to the conclusion that the stranger was keeping a watch upon his movements.

He was dressed in dark clothes, Mexican in their cut, and wore one of the long black cloaks so much affected by the Mexican-Spanish gentry.

"Well, I'll be hanged if I believe there's a man in the world who can run into more adventures in the course of a year than your humble servant to command," he mused to himself, as he walked slowly along, enjoying the flavor of his cigar and at the same time keeping a vigilant watch upon the slight, dark form following so steadily behind him.

Blake's life of adventure had made him as careful and as watchful as an Indian brave.

While apparently taking no heed of what passed around him he saw everything; nothing

escaped his watchful eyes, and so it happened that he detected this spy skulking along in the shadow of the houses.

What his object was in thus dogging his steps was a puzzle which the Fresh was unable to solve.

"He surely can't mean to jump on me at some convenient dark corner and stick a knife in between my ribs," the Fresh muttered, as he reached the last house on the outskirts of the town and turned abruptly about to retrace his steps.

He had anticipated that this movement would bother the spy and cause him to retreat with decided haste.

But in this he was disappointed, for the youth, who was partially concealed in a deep doorway, held his ground, and did not manifest any intention of retiring.

The spot was a lonely one; there wasn't a soul to be seen with the exception of the Fresh and the mysterious stranger in the cloak.

"Maybe he intends to jump out at me as I go by," Blake murmured to himself, as he sauntered slowly toward the spot where the unknown lurked in the shelter of the doorway.

"But if that is his game he isn't wise to allow me to see him, for his presence hiding away in the doorway in such a suspicious manner would be apt to excite any one's apprehensions."

"Perhaps he takes me for a flat, but I don't really understand how that can be, for since my advent in Santa Fé I have succeeded in holding my own pretty well."

That mischief was intended Blake felt certain, and he was all prepared for it.

He quietly slipped his revolver from his pocket and held it in his hand, but pressed against his leg, so that it was not apparent at a distance, then as he came within a hundred feet of the house in the doorway of which lurked the mysterious stranger he gradually drew out to the middle of the road so that he would be fully thirty feet away from the house when he came abreast of it.

This was far enough away, in his judgment, to prevent any trap from being sprung upon him.

But before he came abreast of the house the stranger after casting a careful glance around, as if to satisfy himself that there wasn't any one near, stepped forward and made a motion to the Fresh as if to indicate that he desired to speak to him.

"Oho, it isn't a trap then, after all," muttered Blake to himself, as he beheld this movement on the part of the stranger.

When the other stepped from the shelter of the doorway out into the moonlight, Blake was enabled to get a good view of him.

As he had imagined, the figure of the stranger was that of a boy of eighteen or thereabouts, but it was partially concealed by the long cloak which came down nearly to his heels and the broad-brimmed slouch hat was pulled down low over his eyes, so that all the upper part of the face was hidden, and the lower part was completely concealed by a curly black beard.

The moment he set eyes upon this appendage the Fresh came to the conclusion that it was false and worn merely as a disguise.

"Can I speak a word with you, sir?" the stranger asked, in a low, gruff voice, evidently assumed for the purpose of disguising the real tones of the speaker.

"You can, sir; I am at your service," the Fresh replied, with a polite bow, for the other was evidently a gentleman.

"I came to warn you, sir, that your life will be in danger every moment that you remain in this place."

"That is rather startling intelligence," Blake observed, but he did not appear to be in the least affected by it.

"It is the truth, sir, and I have sought you out to warn you of the danger to which you are exposed, so that you might be on your guard against it."

"I'm very much obliged to you indeed, but as you are a stranger to me, I trust you will pardon the natural inquiry why you should take such an interest in my affairs?"

"Is it not natural—is it not the right thing to do?" the other demanded.

"Suppose that it should come to your knowledge that the life of a man was threatened—that secret enemies were lying in wait to slay him at the first possible opportunity, would you not take it upon yourself to warn the man of the danger that threatened him?"

The point was well taken, as the Fresh was obliged to admit.

"Oh, yes, I presume I would," he replied.

"Of course any man that was anything of a man would do it."

"Certainly, and that is why I have warned you."

"And may I ask your name, so I may know to whom I am indebted for this friendly act?"

The question seemed to embarrass the other, and he hesitated for a few moments before replying.

"I—I—it's not necessary that you should know who I am; in fact there are urgent reasons why I should keep in the background, and I trust you will not attempt to learn what I desire to keep concealed."

"Certainly not!" cried Blake, immediately. "That would be a sorry way indeed to pay you for your kindness in taking the trouble to warn me that danger threatened."

"But are you quite sure that you are right about this matter?"

"Oh, yes, not the least doubt about it."

"The reason I ask is that there are always plenty of men in this world who talk loudly of what they are going to do and yet never attempt to carry out their threats."

"If you were one of the bystanders who witnessed the trouble last night, you know, of course, that the fellow whom I handled so roughly will be apt to try to get square with me if he possibly can."

"I know this and shall be on my guard against him."

"I was not a witness to the trouble that you had last night, but I heard all about it, and when I warn you that you have a secret enemy in Santa Fé who will try to do you harm, I do not refer to Laff Pick or any of his associates."

Blake expressed his surprise at this.

"They are miserable wretches, and though I do not doubt that they will do the best they can to harm you, yet their power is not equal to their malice."

"But the foe of whom I warn you is one who keeps in the dark and strikes at the backs of his victims."

"You are a stranger here, but it is possible that you may have heard of the Bloodsuckers."

"Oh, yes, I've heard of them; a sort of a road-agent, outlaw band," responded Blake.

"Yes, they are a secret league of ruffians who first made their appearance in this neighborhood about six months ago, and there is a great deal of mystery attached to them."

"No one knows who they are, where they come from or whither they go."

"They do not seem to be petty ruffians, for they are always after big game."

"They do not operate, then, right straight along?"

"Oh, no; a month sometimes will go by without any one hearing of the band at all, and then they will suddenly appear, but as I have said they never engage in any petty affairs. In some way your presence in Santa Fé is obnoxious to these dark marauders and they have determined to either drive you from the town or kill you if you will not go."

"That's a nice prospect for a man to contemplate," the Fresh observed, with a grimace.

"Are you at liberty to tell me how you managed to obtain this information?"

"Yes, but I fear it will not profit you any, for the way in which I came to know of the matter is as mysterious as the Bloodsuckers themselves."

"It must be odd, then," Blake observed.

"I sat by the window in my apartment this evening, just after nightfall; the window was open, the street without deserted, not a soul in sight in any direction, and as I sat there distinctly to my ears came the sound of a conversation between two men."

"I listened in amazement, for I couldn't understand how the voices could possibly reach my ears no one being in sight, and yet every word came as distinctly as though they were standing at my side."

"The conversation was between the Chief of the Bloodsuckers and his right-hand man, and the substance of it was that you were to be either driven out of the town or killed as soon as possible."

"The conversation ceased as suddenly as it had begun."

"I reflected upon the matter and came to the conclusion that it was my duty to seek you out and warn you."

"Is it possible for me to visit this apartment? Perhaps I could discover from whence the voices came!" the Fresh asked.

"It is not possible now; at some future time it may be; but in the mean time I will keep on the watch. Adieu."

And then with a graceful wave of the hand the other departed.

CHAPTER XV.

THE GOLDEN PALACE.

BLAKE remained motionless for a few minutes so as to allow the young man time to get out of the way, for he appreciated the service that the stranger had attempted to render him, and understood that it was the wish of the other not to make himself known at present, and so he respected his desire.

When the cloaked and disguised stranger reached the corner of the house he disappeared around it, and in a few seconds afterward the sound of a horse's hoofs rung out on the still night-air.

The Fresh understood what this meant.

The stranger had a horse picketed behind the house so as to be able to make a speedy retreat.

Blake resumed his onward progress, and, as he had expected, when he came to the corner of the house, in the distance he could discern the cloaked stranger mounted on what looked like a black pony, riding away at full speed.

At such a distance, although the rays of the moon were tolerably bright, it was impossible to tell the exact color of the horse, excepting that it was dark.

"No chance to recognize the rider at some future time by means of the horse," the Fresh remarked, as he halted for a moment to take a good look at the flying steed.

"Well, what does it matter, anyway? I will know the voice again if I ever hear it," he soliloquized, as he resumed his onward course.

"Not that it matters much, although I have a natural curiosity to know who the party really is that has taken the trouble to warn me of the hostile designs of these gentle galoots who call themselves the Bloodsuckers."

"It's real funny, though, how I tumble into this sort of thing right straight along."

"I'm too fresh, of course; in some way I've trod on the toes of these chaps, though for the life of me I can't see how the trick was done, for apart from my difficulty with that Laff Pick I haven't interfered with any one else, except going for the alcalde's wealth, but, of course, that don't count."

"The alcalde is not the sort of man to employ any Bloodsucker gang, so it is a mystery why these secret outlaws should be so anxious to run me out of the town."

"One thing though is certain: since they have chosen to declare war, they will not find me behind in doing my level best to damage them all I can, and since the question seems to have narrowed down to the point that there isn't room enough in Santa Fé for both the Bloodsuckers and myself, the result must be that either I must get out or they."

"And who will be the party to go is something that can only be decided by the result of the war."

"They have the advantage of working in the dark, and I can only strike at them when they strike at me, but for all that I'm not much afraid of the result."

"If they do beat me, it will be the first time that any such gang ever succeeded."

By this time the Fresh had got well into the town again.

Proceeding to the Forty Rod Saloon, he enjoyed another cigar and joined in the gossip of the loungers until about nine o'clock; then Jimsonweed made his appearance and suggested to Blake that if he wanted to see the sights of the town it was about time he started.

So a party of half a dozen was made up, Blake and the landlord in the lead, and off they started, their objective point being the saloon sacred to the goddess of chance known as the Golden Palace and kept by Spanish John.

The Golden Palace was a large frame shanty, one-story high only, about thirty feet wide by a hundred long.

Upon entering, the party found themselves in a spacious apartment, about thirty feet by fifty.

A bar ran along one side, fitted up in a really elegant manner, and the rest of the room was devoted to the appliances necessary to enable the guests to indulge in the scientific games known as monté, faro, roulette, keno and chuck-a-luck.

The gamester must indeed be fastidious if he could not find some amusement in this temple devoted to the goddess of chance.

In the rear of the main hall were half a dozen small rooms, made by erecting plain board partitions, about eight feet high, after the style of the old-fashioned oyster-boxes.

Entrance was gained to these rooms by an entry which ran between them, extending from the main saloon to the back door.

The place was in full blast when the Fresh and his party entered.

The piano, which occupied the post of honor at the head of the bar in the open space between the bar and the main door of the saloon, was being vigorously operated upon by a dissipated-looking long-haired youth, a young fellow of about two and twenty, who had happened to stray into the Golden Palace about a week before, a "tenderfoot" from the East, who had struck Santa Fé dead-broke, and had come into the saloon with the design of preying upon the free lunch—always quite an elaborate spread—which Spanish John set out at nine o'clock precisely each night and to which all were free to help themselves, whether they spent any money in the place or not.

The youth went at the "viands" as if he hadn't had anything to eat for a month, and Spanish John, who always presided at the lunch-counter in person, was forced to remark that:

"His royal nibs will bu'st up this hyer free lunch if he calculates to locate in Santa Fé."

But after he had made a hearty meal, he wandered to the piano, which had been opened for the inspection of the crowd, and seating himself at it began to touch the keys in a manner which indicated that he and good music were no strangers.

Spanish John was minus a piano-player at this time, his music man having seen fit to leave in deep disgust because the proprietor of the Golden Palace had been obliged to object to his getting so drunk every night at nine o'clock that it was an utter impossibility for

him to even sit on the piano-stool, much less play.

The long-haired young man, His Royal Nibs, as the proprietor of the place had christened him at the first glance, and as he was ever afterward called, was a piano-player, a pretty good one, too, and so he was immediately engaged to furnish the music.

It was lucky for him that he possessed this one talent, for he was so green about everything else that he certainly would have starved to death had he not been able to "catch on" at the Golden Palace.

The first movement of the party to which Blake belonged was to the bar at the invitation of the landlord of the Forty Rod Saloon.

"Come up, boys, and take a drink to help the house along," he said.

In the Santa Fé region no "true gentleman" ever refuses an invitation of this sort, and so the party ranged up along the bar to nominate their p'ison.

All were patriotic enough to take the native American beverage, known as whisky, with the exception of the Fresh, and he, leaning over the counter, asked in his blandest manner if the "gentle barkeep" could make him a "nice, mild lemonade."

This request so tickled a rough-bearded, brawny fellow standing at the end of the counter that he haw-hawed loudly.

"Put that mule out—he disturbs me," remarked Blake, quietly.

The Fresh was at the end of the counter, almost within reach of the stranger.

The man was a new-comer, had just arrived that night, and so of course knew nothing of Blake, and had jumped to the conclusion, from the fact that he was carefully dressed and had had the "cheek" to ask for a lemonade at a counter where it was but seldom that anything weaker than whisky was sold, that he was a "dandy," and if there is anything that the average Western man despises it is a dandy who has the audacity to put on "frills," as if he was better than common folks.

The cool request of the disguised dandy, as well as the name applied to him, roused the anger of the stranger.

"Wot's that you say?" he roared. "Who do you call a mule? Put me out! put me out, hey? And who is goin' for to do it, I'd like to know?"

"Why, I will, of course," replied Blake, in the most matter-of-fact way possible.

"You will?" and the stranger "squared off" at Blake in a clumsy way.

"Yes, I will, or I'll get a man to bring a measure of oats outside the window there, and so coax you out."

"Oats! Oats be hanged!" cried the man, in deep disgust.

"I want you to understand right hyer and now that I don't want any funny business. You ain't so big a man as I am, or I'd go for you and chew you up."

"I haven't got so much fat on me perhaps, and I haven't drank as much bad liquor to bloat me up, but when it comes down to the solid thing, I reckon I'll weigh about as much as you do."

"I tip the beam at a hundred and eighty!" howled the man, defiantly.

"A hundred and seventy is my fighting weight and I'm right on that now."

"Your fighting weight?" snorted the other, in defiance.

"Bosh! you ain't able to fight a lame man with one hand tied behind him. If I wasn't afraid of killing you at the first lick I'd jest whale you a few, so as to larn you for to keep a civil tongue in your head."

"You're the biggest blower that I've struck in some time," the Fresh remarked.

By this time quite a crowd had gathered around, attracted by the altercation.

"Darn my cats! I'll have to warm you jest for greens!" yelled the man, and then he made a rush at Blake.

The Fresh easily parried the stroke, then with a powerful right-hander he knocked the stranger clean through the window behind him.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MAN FROM 'WAY BACK.

THE brief altercation between the two had attracted the attention of the bystanders, and a hum of astonishment rose on the air when the Fresh so promptly put an end to the discussion by knocking the other through the window.

The action took everybody by surprise, for Blake had been so quiet, had taken the matter so coolly that no one within the room had the slightest idea that he would resort to so summary a way to put an end to the discussion.

And as for the big fellow himself, he would not have been any more astonished if he had been struck by a lightning bolt.

As he was wont to proudly designate himself, he was a "hustler from 'way back;" one of the kind of men who pride themselves upon their personal prowess.

And to be thus rudely handled offended him in the highest degree.

He had not suffered any material damage, and after landing on the soft earth outside of the

window, speedily recovered from the shock, and rising to his feet he peered in at the casement, with a look of amazement on his countenance.

"Say!" he exclaimed, "w'ot kind of a man are you anyway?"

"The right kind, of course," Blake replied. "Can't you see that with half an eye?"

"Look-a-hyer! w'ot did you hit me with?" the fellow demanded.

"Why, it wasn't me that hit you."

"Is that so?"

"Sure as you're born; there was a stray mule wandering around here, and the beast kicked you."

"Blame me if it didn't feel like it," and the man began to climb in through the window.

When he had entered the saloon again he surveyed the Fresh with a great deal of curiosity.

"You ain't sich a big man," he remarked. "I've seen a heap sight bigger men than you are, and I've been able to get away with 'em too, and I ain't a-saying it for to boast either. I ain't much on tooting my own horn, although I am a hard man from 'way back."

"I reckon you must have heered of me."

"I'm Jumping Johnny, I am, and fellers w'ot have tried to crack me say that I am a hard nut."

"I shouldn't be surprised; you look it," Blake remarked.

"Say, I don't bear you any ill-will, but when I hear a cuss call for a lemonade in a saloon like this, where they keep the best kind of whisky, it kinder makes me sick."

"It's all a matter of opinion," Blake rejoined. "Some men like whisky and some like lemonade."

"Oh, no, I can't believe that!" Jumping Johnny declared.

"I can't really believe that any man in his senses would care to tackle any sich nasty stuff."

"Bah! the very thought of sich a thing makes me sick!"

"Say, you don't want any lemonade; you'll take a nice drink of whisky with me. It will make your hair curl."

And the tone of the man from 'way back was persuasive in the extreme.

"Nary whisky," responded the Fresh, tersely.

"W'ot?" fairly gasped the big fellow, in utter astonishment.

"Kin I believe my ears? Do you refuse to drink with a gentleman when you are invited as politely as though you was the Emperor of Roosia or some of them other big-bugs?"

"Your statement is quite correct. I don't care to drink with you."

"That means fight, you know!" and the big fellow began to double up his fists and puff out his cheeks in warlike guise.

"Ah, I see you are not satisfied. You want me to knock you through that window again," Blake remarked, assuming a position that would have delighted the heart of a boxing-master.

"You can't do that trick a second time!" exclaimed the big fellow.

"You took me unawares the first time. You got in a lick when I wasn't looking, but you can't do it ag'in, 'cos I'm on the lookout for you now," and the big fellow brandished his fists in the air in an extremely menacing way.

"You are not satisfied with what you have already got, eh?" the Fresh inquired.

"Satisfied!" exclaimed the other, indignantly.

"Say! w'ot kind of a man do you take me to be, anyway?"

"Do you think I'm the kind of chap w'ot kin be slapped in the face and then say thank ye to the man w'ot did the slapping? No, sir-ee, hoss-fly!"

"I ain't that kind of a rooster at all! But I'm the man w'ot goes in for blood and massacre every time."

"You took an unfair advantage of me, and now I'm going to whale daylight right out of you!"

Blake's answer to this threat was a straight left-hander delivered full at the face of the other.

For all his boasted prowess in the art of war, the man from 'way back was no boxer, and instinctively he threw up both arms to ward off the stroke which threatened to so materially damage his frontispiece.

This was exactly what the Fresh wanted and expected.

The left-hander was but a feint to cover a real attack, for no sooner had the brawny arms of the big fellow been elevated, leaving his chest uncovered, than Blake with his mighty right hand struck his opponent a terrific blow in the chest, and away through the window again went the stranger.

He was not boxer enough to brace himself to resist such a stroke, and as he was within a yard of the window, when the force of the blow hurled him against the ledge of the casement, naturally he tumbled through the opening.

A roar of laughter went up from the bystanders, for this encounter was decidedly more comic than tragic, contrary to what it ought to have been.

The discomfited man arose slowly to his feet, a look of bewilderment upon his stolid features, climbed in through the window, and then sat down on the ledge, rested his hands upon his

knees and gazed in a reflective sort of way at his opponent.

"Say, w'ot kind of a man are you, anyway?" he asked.

"Have you got a smallsteam-engine hid round you somewhere?"

"Not that I know of," the Fresh replied.

"Well, you kin drink all the lemonade you want as far as I am concerned."

"If drinking lemonade will give a feller the power for to hit as hard as a mule kin kick, I reckon I'll sail in on lemonade myself."

"Join me in a social glass, and as it's a new drink to you, you can put a little whisky in to take the edge off," said Blake.

The invitation was accepted in the same frank spirit in which it was given, and after Jumping Johnny had emptied his glass, he was moved to declare that it wasn't such a bad drink after all.

Then with a hearty shake of the hand, accompanied with the declaration that our hero was the best man he ever ran across, the big fellow departed, another herald to vaunt the prowess of the Fresh of Frisco.

The proprietor of the place, Spanish John, made his appearance at this point, and Jimsonweed introducing Blake explained that he had come out for a little amusement.

Spanish John was a tall, dark fellow with a heavily-bearded face.

He was just such a man as would fill the popular conception of the commander of a pirate ship, or the leader of a desperate band of brigands.

He looked every inch the polished ruffian who could cut a throat or scuttle a ship with the utmost adroitness.

With extreme politeness he greeted Blake and expressed his high delight at being honored by a visit from so distinguished a gentleman, and then he went on to say that if his honored guest was in search of a little amusement to pass the time away, there was a gentleman in one of the private rooms who was making up a poker party, and who would be delighted to have the pleasure of Mr. Blake's society.

Quite a distinguished party, too, the host explained, being no less a personage than Miguel Santilla, the chief of police.

"But you must look out for yourself," the host continued, "for the captain bears the reputation of being the finest poker player in the Territory, and as he is a man who is never afraid to back his game for all that he is worth, he is a dangerous antagonist."

"So I should judge," Blake replied; "but that is just the kind of a man that I am looking for. I wouldn't give a cent to play with a man who hadn't the sand to back his hand to his last coin."

"How do you feel, Jimsonweed?" Spanish John asked.

"Are you in a condition to enjoy a little amusement to-night?"

"Oh, yes; I've got a few hundred ducats that I don't really know what to do with, and I am willing to risk 'em for the chance of making more."

"We four then will make up a nice little party, and there won't be any need of looking for more recruits."

The others agreed to this.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE POKER PARTY.

SPANISH JOHN led the way to the private room where sat the captain of police, amusing himself with a cigarette and a game of solitaire.

"These two gentlemen would like a little amusement," the host explained, after they had entered the room and the customary salutations had been exchanged, "and so I invited them to join us in a little game of poker."

"Glad to know it, gentlemen," observed the chief of police, courteously.

"I am not much of a gamester, but I am fond of a quiet game to help pass the time away; but in order to make the thing interesting, I always like to play for high stakes."

"My own idea, exactly," Blake remarked, as he took a seat at the table opposite to Santilla.

"The higher the stakes the greater the amusement."

"Aha! I am glad to meet with a gentleman who thinks as I do in regard to this matter," the chief of police rejoined.

The table was a round one and just big enough to accommodate the four men comfortably.

The Fresh and the chief faced each other, and Spanish John and Jimsonweed sat opposite.

There were half a dozen new packs of cards in their wrappers on the table, and the host, taking the top pack, removed the wrapper.

The cards were the ordinary kind, and the Fresh, who was extremely well posted in regard to such matters, saw that the cards were "honest" ones; that is, they had not been tampered with and no marks had been placed upon them so as to give the player who was acquainted with the secret a tremendous advantage over the others who were not posted.

"We'll cut for deal," the host observed, as

he opened the pack and dextrously shuffled the cards.

"To make it interesting, let us put up a hundred on the cut," suggested Blake.

"The man who wins the deal to take all."

"A hundred dollars is a pretty good sum for a side bet," Jimsonweed remarked.

"Oh, well, gentlemen, we are in for a big game, you know, and there's nothing like beginning right."

"I'll go you a hundred!" exclaimed the chief of police, who had got the idea into his head that the new-comer was trying a little bluff game upon them.

"So will I," said Spanish John.

"Oh, well, since you are all in, I'm not going to stay out," Jimsonweed remarked.

"At the same time I must say that I think a hundred ducats is altogether too steep for a lee-tle side bet."

"There's my wealth," said Blake, producing his roll and placing ten ten-dollar bills on the table.

The chief of police added two fifties to the pile.

The host contributed in the shape of a single hundred-dollar bill, while Jimsonweed made up his stake out of fives and tens.

Spanish John shuffled the cards vigorously, then placed the pack in the center of the table.

"Now, gentlemen, will you all try a shuffle, or will the mixing up that they have already received content you?" he asked.

"I'm satisfied," Blake remarked.

"So am I," said the chief.

"Let 'er slide!" ejaculated Jimsonweed.

"Who cuts first?" Spanish John asked.

"Suppose you try your luck and then let it come round the table in the natural way?" Blake observed.

This course would give the chief of police the second cut and bring Blake last.

"All right," remarked the host, after consulting the others with a glance and finding that all approved of the plan.

"Here goes!"

The ten of hearts came up.

"Bah!" ejaculated the host, in disgust, "that puts me a hundred out."

"Oh, that's not certain," the Fresh observed.

"There's more cards below ten than above it."

This was true enough, but for all that not one of the party had any idea that the ten would win the stake.

The chief of police's turn came next, and he only succeeded in showing a seven spot.

"The ten is a gentleman so far," the Fresh observed.

Jimsonweed's face began to brighten up; he thought he stood a good chance to capture the four hundred dollars, but his disgust was great when his cut only displayed a two spot.

"Oh, I reckon you've got a sure thing of it this time!" he exclaimed to Blake, as that gentleman's fingers closed upon the cards.

"Well, before I decide the event, I'm open for a speculation," the Fresh remarked.

"I stand ready to bet any gentleman here five hundred dollars that I will win the deal, or that I will not win, just as he pleases."

The rest looked at each other; they did not know exactly what to make of this bold declaration.

One thing was sure though, the Californian was a sport all the way through.

"Come, gentlemen, don't all speak at once," the Fresh continued, finding that the others hesitated.

"Who is going to be the lucky individual to pick up five hundred of my ducats with as little trouble as turning one's hand over?"

Still they hesitated.

Five hundred dollars was a pretty large sum of money to risk on a single bet, and even the captain of police, who had started in with the idea of impressing the stranger with the belief that he was a sport of the first degree who risked his cash in the most reckless fashion, was reluctant to follow so bold a lead.

"Five hundred that I win or that I don't win," said Blake, in a persuasive way.

"Or, if that offer isn't large enough to tempt any one of you to try your luck, I'll make it an even thousand, and as I'm willing to give the man who bets the say-so, it really looks to me as if I was offering a splendid chance for a speculation."

"It would really be like picking up money for any one of you to take up my banter."

"Surely some one of you must have the sand to go it."

This speech was addressed more directly to the chief of police than to the others, and that gentleman understood that the defiance was intended chiefly for him.

Santilla had visited the Golden Palace with the idea of "cleaning out" the Californian if he put in an appearance at that noted resort, and had come prepared to bet largely, but the extent of the Fresh's wager rather staggered him.

But a moment's reflection showed him that if he intended to despoil the Californian of his wealth, the bigger the bets the quicker the end would be attained—that is, if he was fortunate enough to win.

So he determined to accept the defiance.

Out came his roll of bills and ten one-hundred-dollar notes he placed upon the table.

"I take your bet, and there's the cash that says you will not win this deal!" the captain of police exclaimed, as he deposited the money with quite a flourish upon the table.

"That's the talk!" Blake replied.

"And that is the way I like to bet. I had always a deal rather back myself to win than lose.

"Now, then, here she goes!"

He cut the cards with the ease and grace of a practiced player, the others watching the operation with intense interest.

The queen of diamonds appeared.

For a moment the three losers stared at the painted pasteboard in disgust, and it was as much as the captain of police could do to refrain from ripping out a hearty Spanish curse at his ill-luck.

Eleven hundred dollars of his capital had been captured by the man whom he had intended to despoil at a single stroke.

It was a bad beginning, and although there is an old proverb which says that a bad beginning makes a good ending, yet, just at this time, it would have been hard work to make any of the losers take any stock in it.

"So much for so much," remarked Blake, jocosely, as he drew the money to him and smiled blandly upon the others.

"Now, gentlemen, I'm just the man to give you your revenge, and as I've struck it rich at the beginning, I give you my word I'll bet lively enough to raise you all out of your boots."

Of course the others smiled at this pleasantry, and although they attempted to take the success of the Fresh as a matter-of-course, yet their smiles partook of the nature of a ghastly grin.

"Now for blood," remarked Blake, as he shuffled the cards in the dextrous manner peculiar to the experienced gamester.

The cards were cut, and then Blake dealt.

"What's the limit?" he remarked, after this operation was finished.

"Nary limit," answered Santilla, tersely.

"And the ante?"

"Ten dollars, say," suggested Spanish John, "and there's my wealth."

And he pushed a ten-dollar bill to the middle of the table.

The hands were good; all staid in.

"How many cards?" Blake inquired.

Spanish John took two, the captain of police required three, Jimsonweed also took three, while the Fresh contented himself with one.

The rest exchanged glances; was he bluffing, or had he an invincible hand?

CHAPTER XVIII.

A BIG GAME.

NONE of the players had reason to complain that fortune was not inclined to smile upon them, for one and all had received good hands.

The only question was, which man of the four held the best cards?

The ball was put in motion by Spanish John, who announced that he thought his hand was worth five hundred dollars, at the least, and added that sum to the pot.

The chief of police immediately "saw" the bet and went five hundred better.

"Oh, this is too rich for my blood!" the saloon-keeper exclaimed, and Jimsonweed threw up his hand.

He had two pair, too, sevens and tens, a hand worth betting a deal of money upon as things usually go in a poker game, but the reckless betting of the others made him suspect that he didn't stand any show, and so he resolved not to lose any more money than he had already staked.

The Fresh, on the contrary, seemed eager to invest.

He put up a thousand more and another thousand in addition.

Then it was Spanish John's turn, but the heavy betting had made him wary.

He held three of a kind—three trays—but he did not dare to venture any more money, and so he too passed and went out of the game.

The contest was now narrowed down to the captain of police and the Californian.

Santilla held four queens and an ace, so that there was only one combination of cards that could possibly beat it, and that was four kings.

Now, according to the rule of probabilities, the chances were about a million to one that the Fresh did not hold that particular hand, but the chief of police did not have the courage to risk any more money.

He simply contented himself with putting up the necessary wealth to enable him to "call" the Californian.

"Four little ones," said Blake, but he did not display the cards though.

"Aha!" cried Santilla, with a grunt of satisfaction, while the other two bent eagerly forward to watch the proceedings, "the stake is mine then, for I hold four queens!"

And with an air of triumph he spread his cards out upon the table.

"That is a very good hand," the Fresh remarked.

"A very good hand indeed, and I wonder

that you did not feel inclined to venture more money upon it.

"A man with a hand like that would not be blamed for putting even his life upon it."

"Oh, I didn't want to clean you out completely at the first stroke," the chief of police answered, assuming a grand air now that his triumph was assured.

"I knew of course that the pot was mine, for there's only one hand in the pack that can beat the cards I hold."

"Yes, only one, four kings and an ace," and then to the astonishment of the others the Californian laid down his cards upon the table, four kings and an ace.

The brow of the chief of police grew as dark as the sky when overshadowed by a thunder-cloud, and leaning back in his chair he fairly gasped in amazement, while Spanish John and Jimsonweed looked on completely astonished.

"But you said you had four little ones!" Santilla exclaimed, angrily.

He saw that he had been tricked, and his rage was great.

"A man can say anything he likes at poker, and it don't count, so long as he doesn't admit that his opponent's hand is good," the Fresh replied.

"Cards win the money, not words."

"But it is a trick—an outrage to fool us in such a fashion!" the chief of police declared, getting more and more angry as he reflected how completely he had been deceived by the careless words of the Californian.

"Oh, nonsense! it was only a joke, that's all. Do you want to turn a poker-party into a funeral?"

"I will thank you not to joke in such a way with me again!" Santilla exclaimed, loftily. "I am not used to such things, and I cannot permit such jesting."

"Oh, don't you?" and a quizzical look appeared upon the face of Blake.

"No, and I wish to give you fair warning that I shall not allow any one to make a fool of me."

The tone of Santilla was arrogant in the extreme, and his manner offensive, just as if he was intent upon picking a quarrel.

Now Blake was naturally anything but a patient man, and no one ever indicated such a desire to him without being accommodated in the speediest manner.

"Sir, neither your words nor your manner are agreeable to me, and I want you to understand that when I sit down to play poker, I calculate to play after my own fashion, and there isn't any law that I know of which compels anybody to play with me if they don't want to."

"But before we discuss this point, suppose we settle up this game."

"This pot is mine, I reckon, without dispute."

"By your words you as good as said that you hadn't any hand!" exclaimed the chief of police, fiercely, and he shoved his hand forward on the table as though he intended to prevent the Californian from taking the money.

But the Fresh was in readiness for just such an action.

In an instant his keen-edged, sharp-pointed bowie-knife was out and he poised it menacingly over the table.

"If you dare to put your paw on that money, I'll drive my knife through it!" he cried.

Santilla glared at the Fresh for a moment, and then, with a fierce oath, attempted to draw his revolver.

We say attempted, for the Californian was on the watch for just such a movement and the other was not allowed to complete the action.

The moment the chief of police reached for his weapon the muscular left arm of the Fresh shot out, and the iron-like fist catching Santilla right between the eyes sent him sprawling on his back on the floor.

Besides the shock produced by the blow, when the chief of police struck the floor his head came in contact with it with a violence that for a few moments stunned him.

This afforded Blake an opportunity to gather in the spoils of war.

And when Santilla, recovered sufficiently to understand what had occurred, sprung to his feet, eager to revenge the indignity which had been offered him, the Californian was prepared for war.

The bowie-knife had been returned to its place in his belt, and in its stead the Fresh flourished one of the self-cocking revolvers which he could handle so well.

The chief of police had plucked forth his pistol as he struggled to his feet, but upon finding himself covered by the leveled revolver of the Californian he hesitated, uncertain what to do.

To use the Western phrase, the Fresh had "the drop" on him in the worst kind of way, and Santilla was not so blinded with rage as not to be able to see it.

To attempt to cock his revolver would surely bring upon him his dead shot, for even the merest tyro with the pistol could hardly fail to hit his man when separated from him by some six feet of space only.

Being thus taken at such a disadvantage, all the chief of police could do was to glare with rage at his opponent, and as soon as he recovered the use of his tongue he cried:

"You are a scoundrel to assault me in this outrageous way! Do you intend to murder me in cold blood without giving me a chance for my life?"

"I reckon you didn't intend to give me much show!" Blake retorted.

"You were quick enough to pull your pistol on me, and if I hadn't laid you out the chances are big that you would have tried to settle my hash with scant ceremony."

"Did you not draw your knife on me?" Santilla demanded.

"Yes, to keep you from laying your paws on the money which I had fairly won!"

"You acted like a boy to fool us with your nonsense about the worth of your hand."

"Oh, you can't appreciate a joke, your head is too thick!" the Fresh retorted.

"The stake was mine. I held the cards which called for it, and if I choose to have a little fun with my hand, no one has any right to complain."

"You have outraged me with a blow!" the chief of police declared.

"No man ever yet struck me without being called to an account for it. I demand satisfaction!"

"Certainly, that is all right; that is only natural, and I'm ready to give you all the satisfaction you want, in any way, shape or manner, and that is the kind of man I am," the Fresh replied.

"I tell you what it is, chief, you never met a more agreeable fellow about that sort of thing than I am."

"All you have to do is to spit out the identical kind of satisfaction you want, and you can bet all the wealth you can rake up in this world that I am the very chap that will accommodate you."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CHALLENGE.

"It is for your heart's blood that I thirst!" cried the chief of police, with savage energy.

"Well now, really, you must excuse me, for I reckon you'll have to find some other beverage to slake your thirst with at present, for I haven't got any more blood than I want, and I'm sure I can't spare any."

"If you'll say wine now, I'll set up a half-basket in a minute; I can well afford to do so after getting away with a pot like this one that I have just picked up," the Californian replied, in his easy, careless way.

"Enough of jesting. I demand satisfaction, and I will have it!" the chief of police cried, angrily.

"Certainly, of course, and I'm the man to give it to you any way you like."

"How will you have it? Name your weapons—spit out your time and place, and in regard to that, permit me to say that there isn't any time like the present, and the quicker a thing of this sort is settled the better, so drive on your mule team as soon as you like."

Santilla hesitated.

Despite the briefness of the time during which he had dwelt in the old town of Santa Fé, the fame of the Californian had been widely trumpeted.

His deeds and skill had been greatly exaggerated, as is generally the case in all such instances.

He was said to be not only an expert boxer and wonderful wrestler, but also a genius who could handle all kinds of weapons in the most scientific manner.

And as a story never loses in the telling, each man who related the tale of the stranger's exploits felt called upon, in order to make the recital more astonishing, to add a little to it.

And now that he was called upon to name his weapons, Santilla pondered upon what he had heard.

The Californian was an expert pistol-shot, a wonderful man with the bowie-knife, and with the rifle it was claimed that his equal did not exist in the Territory.

Now, Santilla was a fair shot both with revolver and rifle, but was not an expert with the knife, and it seemed to him that if he chose either one of the three weapons he would simply be making a present of his life to his opponent, if only one-half of what was said in regard to his skill was true.

Then a bright idea flashed upon the Mexican.

Before coming to Santa Fé he had been an officer in the Mexican service—had held the commission of captain in a cavalry regiment, and, of course, had received the usual instruction in the use of the saber.

Here then was a weapon which, the chances were a hundred to one, would be unfamiliar to the Californian.

"Come, your choice, and don't be all day about it!" exclaimed Blake, perceiving that the other hesitated.

"Sabers, and we will fight to the death!" cried the chief of police, fiercely.

Spanish John grinned and Jimsonweed looked astonished at this announcement.

The Spaniard, knowing that Santilla had been an officer in the Mexican cavalry service, guessed his game, while the saloon-keeper was astonished at such an outlandish weapon being chosen.

"That suits me!" the Fresh replied.

"I had just as lief carve you with a saber as any other kind of a cheese-knife or toad-sticker that was ever invented, but I reckon you'll have to provide the weapons, though, for I don't own any saber, and I don't know anybody in the camp that does."

"I have a pair of sabers and will be glad to lend you one, although I give you fair warning I intend to kill you with as little mercy as though you were a mad-dog!" Santilla exclaimed.

"Oh, that is all right," the Fresh replied.

"You are welcome to go in and do your level best as far as I am concerned."

"For my part I am not particularly anxious to kill you, but I think I should really enjoy slicing off a piece of each of your ears, so that I would be able to know you again if I ever happened to meet you."

"I always like to put my brand on all my cattle."

The cool insolence of the speech caused the chief of police to flare up again.

"By the everlasting hills!" he cried, shaking his clinched fist in furious anger at the sarcastic Californian, "when this fight is ended you will not be in a condition to jest—you will be only fit for dogs to eat."

"If you love the dogs, don't let 'em try to sharpen their teeth on my bones, for I will poison 'em for sure," Blake retorted.

"Enough of words—let us come to deeds!" said the chief of police, impatiently.

"The sabers are at my office, and in my opinion the quicker this affair is settled the better."

"That is my idea exactly; procrastination is the thief of time; that's an old adage and an extremely true one."

"You say the sabers are at your office?"

"They are—ten minutes' walk from here."

"Suppose we get them at once?" Blake suggested.

"There's a nice moon to-night, plenty of light for such a picnic as we contemplate, and we can surely find some quiet spot on the outskirts of the town where we can settle our little affair without difficulty."

"We need seconds," remarked the chief of police, and then he glanced at Spanish John and Jimsonweed as much as to ask if they would do.

"Oh, yes, they'll fill the bill nicely," observed Blake, quick to comprehend the meaning of the look.

"Spanish John can act for you, and my esteemed friend hyer, Mister Jimsonweed, will do his prettiest at my back."

"I shall be glad to oblige," said the Spaniard.

"So will I," the saloon-keeper added.

"Come on, then, and don't let us waste any more time!" exclaimed the Fresh, briskly.

"Follow me, and we will soon make an end to this matter," said Santilla.

And then the party adjourned to the street.

The chief of police and Spanish John went on in the advance, while Blake and Jimsonweed brought up the rear.

Santilla was a little uneasy in his mind. The prompt acceptance of the weapon which he had proposed by the other disturbed him.

"Can it be possible that this scoundrel knows how to use a saber?" he observed, cautiously, to Spanish John, as they walked along.

"Oh, no, I think not."

"But he manifested no surprise or alarm when I mentioned sabers."

"He's a reckless dare-devil and knows no better. If you had been an expert cannoneer and had challenged him to fight with ten-pounders, he would have accepted with equal alacrity. In certain matters such men as he are madmen and are not capable of understanding the danger which they encounter."

To the average Mexican mind this was the only reasonable explanation for the foolhardiness often displayed by the American frontiersmen.

As Santilla had stated, it was only a short walk to his office.

There the sabers were secured, and then the party took up the line of march for the outskirts of the town.

Spanish John acted as the guide, for, as he explained, he knew a nice, quiet spot, remote from the road, where they would not be apt to be disturbed by passers-by.

And when the duelists arrived at the place they found that Spanish John's statement was perfectly correct.

A fringe of bushes shielded them from observation, and the ground was as level as the palm of one's hand.

The foemen took their places with unsheathed sabers.

The word was given, and they advanced and crossed blades.

And the moment they did so the chief of po-

lice discovered to his disgust that his opponent was no novice in the use of the weapon.

That was apparent from the manner in which he handled the saber.

But Santilla was not allowed any time to reflect upon this fact, for hardly had the shining blades crossed when the Californian began a fierce attack.

With a brilliant "parade" he confused his opponent, who gave ground, dismayed by the fury of the assault.

And then by a clever trick Santilla's saber was twisted out of his hand, and after this disarmament, with the flat of his blade the Californian dealt his opponent a terrible stroke on the head, felling him as though he had been shot.

Spanish John ran to the assistance of the chief of police, fearing that his skull was fractured.

But Santilla was only stunned, and in a few moments recovered his senses.

When he arose to his feet, assisted by his second, he announced that he had received all the satisfaction he craved, and then in gloomy disgust departed, accompanied by Spanish John.

Jimsonweed was delighted, and despite of Blake's injunction of silence, when he returned to the town rehearsed the story of the fight with great gusto.

The Fresh thus had new laurels added to his chaplet.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PAINTED BEAN.

CHANGE we now for awhile the scene of our story.

Thirty miles northwest of Santa Fé in the mountain foothills a small party of Indian warriors were encamped.

It was a thickly-wooded district, game was abundant and the party were evidently on a hunting excursion, and it had been a successful one, too, as the skins visible about the camp showed.

There were only five in the party, one old "buck" and four young braves, scarcely more than striplings, not one of them eighteen as yet.

It was high noon at the time we bring the Indian camp to the attention of our readers.

The lads were absent in search of game, and only the old chief was at home.

He was a man of splendid physique, tall and brawny, although possessing the crooked legs which are a peculiarity of the horse Indians, as those tribes are termed who spend the greater part of their time in the saddle, dating from the moment when they are big enough to cling to the back of a horse.

And so it follows that as they seldom walk, their lower limbs become crooked, and the man whose brawny upper part makes him appear like a giant when seated on the ground, when he gets up his misshapen lower limbs bring him down below the medium height.

The chief was a man well in years, sixty or seventy at least, but still in almost full possession of all his splendid physical powers, though his face was so seamed and disfigured by the unrelenting hand of time that it appeared as hard as though carved out of a block of wood.

The Indian was no common man, as the records of the frontier for the last forty years could show.

He was an Apache chief and bore the odd name of the Painted Bean.

In the olden time he had been one of the great war-chiefs, and it was his boast that he had slain ten times as many pale-faces as he had fingers and toes, and those who had watched his career for the last forty years did not believe that this boast was in the least exaggerated.

In fact there were plenty of the old frontiersmen prompt to affirm that the statement instead of overleaping the truth in reality fell short of it.

The Apaches were a warlike nation, and from the early days of the settlement of the West have given the settlers and the Government much trouble and the particular band to which the Painted Bean belonged had been one of the most troublesome in the nation.

But at last the red-skins had been beaten down and, though the band led by the Painted Bean had been one of the last to surrender, yet it had finally been brought to bay, two-thirds of them killed in the fight that ensued, and the others forced to surrender.

Painted Bean's band was on a reservation now about a hundred odd miles to the southwest of Santa Fé, and the old chief, having given up his bad habits, was now a "good Indian," although he had plenty of white-skinned enemies, who did not hesitate to assert that the chief and his bucks were up to all sorts of deviltry when the Government agent was not watching them.

Painted Bean and his band were very good Indians about the time that the Government rations were being given out, but very bad red-skins when the rations were disposed of and the agent's back was turned.

The old chief lay upon the sward wrapped from head to heel in his dirty blanket, although basking in the full rays of the noonday sun.

He was puffing away at one of the quaint In-

dian pipes, apparently enjoying himself hugely, when a horseman came riding along.

The rider was no stranger to our readers, being the leader of the men who had made so desperate an attack upon the Fresh of Frisco and the Indian girl, the Bloodsucker chief, in fact.

He was dressed exactly the same as on the night of the attack, excepting that he did not wear the black half-mask.

But the long hair, streaming around his face, and the heavy beard, together with the broad-brimmed slouch hat pulled down over his eyes, afforded an efficient disguise.

The Indian never stirred as the horseman rode up; his jet-black, bead-like eyes had surveyed the other the moment he made his appearance on the trail, coming through the shrubbery which had previously concealed him, and the scrutiny apparently satisfied him that there wasn't any danger to be apprehended from the man.

On his part, the horseman cast a careful glance around, as if he wished to satisfy himself that there wasn't anybody else around.

The wooded knoll which the red-skins had selected for their camp was so situated, being surrounded by open country on all sides, that it was impossible for any one to play the spy upon any conversation that might take place there.

The stranger dismounted from his horse, tied the animal to one of the trees, and then approached the chief, who smoked his pipe in perfect composure, just deigning to notice the presence of the other.

"How?" said the horseman.

"How?" responded the savage.

"I heard that you and your braves were hunting in this neighborhood, and so I started to see you. You do not remember me, I suppose?"

"Yes, chief remember," was the unexpected reply.

"Oh, you do?"

"Yes, know you—false hair, false beard—know you all the same," Painted Bean responded; he spoke English quite fluently.

"Well, that saves explanations and time, eh, chief?" remarked the other, seating himself upon the grassy sward, evidently with the idea of making himself comfortable.

"Yes, yes, heap save."

"We haven't seen each other for some time, chief."

"Many moons."

"We have done some good strokes of business together in our time."

The old Indian grinned, showing his white, fang-like teeth.

"Do you know how I am situated now?"

"Me know."

"You manage to keep posted on what is going on, I see."

"Oh, yes, the Painted Bean does not sleep."

"How is it that you never come down to see me?"

"No business."

"I see, I see; you're just old business all the time. By the way, how do you stand now? You're a good Indian, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, good Injun," and again the old chief grinned.

"Some of your young men jump over the traces and kick up a row sometimes, I suppose?"

"Yes, yes; me so sorry—me talk to 'um; they drink fire-water and say go to blazes."

"And then they leave the agency and become bad Indians?"

"Yes, yes, me can't help it."

"How many braves have you got that you can trust?"

"Four sons, trust them same as myself."

"Oh, yes, I had forgotten your boys, but then I haven't met you, you know, for nearly five years, and of course in that time they have grown up."

"Four good braves," said the old warrior, proudly. "Long Wolf, Little Gun, Funny Bird and Black Mustang."

"Yes, I have heard of every one of them, and report says that there are no better warriors in the Apache nation."

"Great braves all!" exclaimed the chief, sentimentally.

"Well, Painted Bean, if you want to make a stake I can give you a chance."

"How much?" asked the Indian, his eyes sparkling with greed.

"A thousand dollars for one job and about two thousand for another."

"Aha!" exclaimed the red-skin, gratified at the prospect, "that is the kind of business I like. Me do it—not much risk?" and he fixed his glittering orbs inquiringly upon the other.

"No, not much. Job number one is to settle the hash of a single man."

"That is a good price, then," observed the chief. "I have killed for ten dollars."

"Yes, but no such man as this fellow, for he is a fighter."

The lip of the old Indian curled in contempt.

"The white man lives not on the earth whom I cannot overcome in single fight!" he exclaimed, proudly.

"Oh, I know you're a born fighter, chief, but this man of whom I speak is one fellow picked out of ten thousand."

"His name is Blake, and he calls himself the Fresh of Frisco; perhaps you may have run across him somewhere?"

The Indian shook his head.

"Well, he's about as bad as they make 'em now, I tell you, and you'll find it no easy job to get away with him."

"You know the Indian girl, Lute Winne-mucca?"

The chief nodded.

"Well, I, with five good men, attacked this Blake and the girl on the open prairie, the other night, and got mighty well whipped."

"Two of the men were killed outright, and the other two so disabled that I doubt if ten thousand dollars would be any inducement to bring them to attack the fellow again."

"I will meet him single-handed and slay him!" exclaimed the chief, loftily.

"All right, if you care to try it; but if you will take my advice you will lay a trap for him and jump on the fellow with all your warriors, so as not to give him the ghost of a chance to escape."

"I will see," replied the Indian, who, for all his boasting, was a crafty fellow, who desired to always work with the advantage on his side.

"And the odder job?"

"When this first one is finished I will explain the second. Come into Santa Fé to-night and take a look at your man."

"I will come," said the Indian.

"Any one will point him out to you. Jackson Blake is his handle."

And then he rose and approached his horse.

"The Painted Bean never forgets," the chief replied.

The stranger mounted and with a wave of his hand rode away.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PROPOSAL.

OLD BULLION sat in the plainly-furnished office where, as alcalde, he ruled the town of Santa Fé.

To do the burg of Santa Fé full justice it may be remarked that the town almost ran itself.

Then the captain of police, Miguel Santilla, was an excellent man, although he did not succeed in holding his own when opposed to such a man as Jackson Blake, the Fresh of Frisco, but then there were few men who could.

Marmaduke thought a good deal of Santilla; he was such a pleasant, courtly gentleman; but then he came of a good family, had seen service under half a dozen different flags and in as many climes, and was a thorough polished man of the world.

Old Bullion had noticed that for the last six or eight months the captain of police had been paying particular attention to his daughter, the peerless Isabelle, and he was rather pleased at the idea.

Ever since his daughter had grown to girlhood and begun to attract attention by her rare beauty he had been anxious about her.

The sole heiress of his enormous wealth, it was only natural that she should attract suitors, even if she was as ugly as sin itself, but when, in addition to the wealth, a girl as beautiful as an angel was to be won, it was not strange that every man who was free to marry should desire to find favor in her eyes.

And the father had been apprehensive that some plausible scoundrel might succeed in winning the prize so well worth the toil of any man.

True, he knew that Isabelle was no silly girl—no frontier maiden used only to the wild life of the Far Western wilds—for she had been carefully educated at one of the best convent schools that the cultured East could boast.

The grim old cattle-king had suffered the pang of parting with his dearly beloved daughter when she was only eight years old; he carried her to the East, placed her in school, and then returned to the West, and for ten years had only seen her twice a year for a few weeks at a time during her vacation.

Old Bullion had the right idea about the matter, and was determined that his girl should be educated as a young woman ought to be who would one day inherit a colossal fortune.

And besides the accomplishments and graces which the school imparted, during her vacation visits to the frontier she learned to ride as well as any cowboy, shoot like a champion wing-shot, run like a grayhound, and could even boast of the accomplishment of throwing a bowie-knife after the fashion of the red warriors.

The girl had a level head, too, and the father boasted, with justice, that there wasn't any nonsense about his beauty.

To use the Western expression, she was all hard horse sense from the word go.

The thoughts of the old man were turned to Miguel Santilla and his daughter at the time we introduce the reader to the alcalde's office.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea for them to make

a match," he soliloquized, as he leaned back in his chair and elevated his feet to his official desk, at the same time producing a cigar and lighting it.

"As a general rule, I don't take much stock in Mexicans or Spanish-Mexicans," he continued.

"The boys hit 'em off about right when they call them Greasers, and I should be mighty sorry to have my gal get afoul of one of them."

"But this Santilla doesn't seem to be of that breed at all."

"He's a pure Spaniard, with none of the Mexican-Indian blood about him, and a gentleman clean through."

"A man of brains and pluck, although that infernal sassy rascal who calls himself the Fresh of Frisco did get the best of him the other night, but then he managed to clean me out too; he's the darnedest cuss that ever struck this town, and I never saw his equal for either getting into scrapes or getting out of them. Hang me if the town ain't really seemed to be smarter since he struck it."

At this point the door opened and the captain of police made his appearance.

Notwithstanding his complete defeat at the hands of the dashing stranger he did not seem to be at all the worse for the encounter.

He felt the sting of the discomfiture though, and it rankled to his very soul.

"Hallo! glad to see you; sit down," said Old Bullion, waving his hand toward a chair.

"You don't seem to show any signs of your leetle misunderstanding with that sassy chap t'other night," the alcalde observed, as the captain of police took the chair and seated himself in it.

"No, luckily I escaped any severe hurt, but honestly, alcalde, I have to thank my opponent for it, for he could have either wounded or killed me if he had so chosen."

"If that galoot wasn't so terribly fresh and sassy he'd be a wonderful man," Old Bullion growled.

"Yes, he appears to be a master-hand with all kinds of weapons."

"When I became embroiled in a difficulty with him I was somewhat puzzled to know what weapon to choose, for I had an idea that he was an expert pistol-shot, and also equally skillful with the rifle."

"Now, though I can do fairly with either yet I am not a crack-shot by any manner of means, and I was determined after I became mixed up in the affair so that there wasn't any possible retreat, without showing the white feather, that I would not give him any advantage if I could possibly avoid it."

"I see, I see, and that was the reason you chose sabers, thinking that with such a strange weapon you would have the dead-wood on him."

"Yes, that was the idea exactly. I fancied that the odds would be about a hundred to one that he never had a saber in his hand, much less knew how to use one."

"But the fellow had you foul!" old Bullion cried. "He used the blamed thing like a fencing-master."

"Yes, I have taken lessons in the use of the saber myself, of course, and was counted to be a pretty fair swordsman, but I was like a novice who had never handled the weapon before when confronted with this fellow."

"But enough of this; it makes me sick when I think how completely I was defeated!" the captain exclaimed, an expression of disgust upon his dark yet handsome face.

"Oh, yes, I can understand that."

"We'll leave this disagreeable subject and come to a more pleasant one."

"I don't know as you have noticed it, Mr. Marmaduke, but for some time past I have been endeavoring to render myself agreeable to your daughter, the beautiful Isabelle."

"Well, well, I reckon I ain't blind, Santilla," Old Bullion replied, lying back in his chair and indulging in a grin, accompanied by a series of knowing winks.

"I presume I ought to have spoken to you in the first place," the other continued. "But a nervous dread lest my suit might not find favor in your eyes kept me silent."

"Oh, that's all right!" the old man exclaimed, heartily. "There isn't the least objection on my part. Go in and win if you can."

"Mr. Marmaduke, I appreciate your kindness, I assure you, and will do my best to deserve your favor."

"Oh, I'm up to snuff if I am getting old and in my dotage!" the alcalde exclaimed.

"No one that knows you would say anything of the kind," the other observed. "There's many a man of forty in Santa Fé who is not as young as you are in reality."

"Well, I reckon that's a deal of truth in that. I hold my own about as good as the best of them. But, I say, how do you get on with my gal?"

"In faith I hardly know how to answer that question," the captain replied, slowly.

"I had an idea that my attentions were not distasteful to her, but in the last day or two it seems to me that her manner toward me has changed, and that she does not look upon me

with the same favorable eyes that she did only a short time ago."

"Well, that's strange."

"Will you pardon me if I speak frankly the suspicion that is in my mind?" Santilla asked, abruptly.

The alcalde looked surprised.

"Certainly, go on, spit it out."

"It may be only my imagination, of course, but it seems to me that since the arrival in Santa Fé of this Jackson Blake—this Fresh of Frisco—her manner toward me has changed."

"Oh, but that is utter nonsense!" the alcalde blurted out.

"You can't really believe that a gal like my Isabelle would fall in love with such a fellow at first sight?"

"It doesn't seem possible, alcalde, but then things of that kind do happen sometimes, you know."

"Oh, yes, I admit that, but then the gals are not like my gal!"

"The fellow has a dashy, showy way with him, and since he has been in Santa Fé has succeeded in playing the rôle of the hero to perfection."

"He has been engaged in two or three brawls, you know, and has come out the winner every time."

"With such a man a romantic girl might fancy herself in love."

"Yes, that's very true, but the trick can't be worked. This fellow is as brave as a lion and as cunning as a cat, but he's nothing but a common card-sharp according to all accounts, and my gal is not for him."

"It may be merely an idle fancy, you know, but I thought it worth while to speak."

"Certainly, and I'll keep my eyes open, and if there is anything in it, you can bet I'll find it out."

"I would not say anything to your daughter."

"Oh, no, it is with my gentleman I will deal."

And here the conversation ended.

CHAPTER XXII.

ANOTHER WARNING.

It was on the evening of the same day that the conversation between the great cattle-king, Old Bullion, and the captain of police took place, as detailed in our last chapter.

Blake sat in his room in the Forty Rod Saloon.

He had just finished his supper, and, in accordance with his usual custom, had lit a cigar and was seated in a chair, tilted up against the wall, enjoying the same, when a stone was tossed in through the open window.

The dusk of the night had come and Blake had lit a candle, the rays of which dimly illuminated the room, and so he was able to plainly distinguish the stone which landed on the floor right at his feet.

There was a paper tied to the stone.

"Hallo, that's a message!" he exclaimed, as he stooped and picked up the stone.

"And that reminds me that I must be careful how I promenade around this room with that candle burning and the window open and uncurtained."

"Any decent shot could plug me from the outside without any trouble, and no one would ever know how the job was done."

It was only a little scrap of paper wrapped around the stone and neatly tied with a string.

Blake removed and unfolded it.

Upon it in a plain, round, schoolboy-like hand was written a sentence:

"The friend who warned you the other night desires to say a few words to you if you will have the kindness to come to the back of the hotel."

"Of course I'll come," the Fresh muttered as he thrust the paper into his pocket; then he made an examination to see if his pistols were all right, extinguished his candle, put on his hat and descended to the street.

He passed out of the back door of the saloon, and, as he expected, in the distance discerned the youth wrapped in the black cloak and mounted upon the dark pony.

Blake advanced directly toward the horseman, and on his part the rider urged his steed forward at a walk until a spot was reached so situated that the conference between the two could not possibly be overheard by any prying eavesdropper; then he drew rein and waited for Blake to come up.

"I had something important to say to you," the horseman remarked, "and as I was scouting around the hotel I happened to catch a glimpse of your figure through the window, so I tossed the stone in with the note attached."

"I am very much obliged to you indeed for your trouble, and I will try and return the service if I ever have the opportunity."

"Oh, don't trouble yourself about that," the horseman replied.

"It is a duty that we owe to each other, and we are not fit to live in this world if we are not willing to assist a fellow-creature."

"That is the golden rule, I know, but there are a great many who do not live up to it, and

as we journey through life we really seem to meet more rascals than honest men, although of course there isn't any doubt that the latter outnumber the former a hundred to one.

"If this was not the truth society couldn't hold together and our boasted civilization would be a gigantic failure."

"Yes, that is true enough, but the idea is the hundred honest men go their ways quietly, attending to their business, while the one rascal makes himself so conspicuous that everybody either sees or hears of his doings."

"There isn't much doubt that you've hit upon the true explanation."

"But to come to business," observed the stranger, abruptly. "I have heard the mysterious voices again."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Blake, with eager interest.

"Yes, I was sitting by the window late this afternoon. In fact ever since I first heard the mysterious sounds I have spent a great deal of my time at the window, with the idea of discovering the reason for the strange occurrence."

"But in this I was not successful."

"It is about as odd a thing as I have ever heard of," Blake remarked, reflectively.

"Yes; and for the life of me I cannot discover any explanation of the mysterious affair."

"Sitting by the window, the voices come distinctly to my ears, plainly audible although the conversation seems to take place quite a distance away; yet, when I look from my window there isn't a soul in sight."

"Perhaps the sounds come from the room beneath the one which you are in," the Fresh suggested.

"No; for that is the dining-room through which the servants are constantly passing, and it would be impossible for these men to hold any private consultation there."

"And, mind you, they speak with perfect freedom, as though they were not in the least afraid of being overheard."

"Well, it is a mystery."

"And I have gone to the apartment right underneath the moment I heard the voices, with the idea of seeing if the sounds came from there, and found the room in possession of the female servants, who, in answer to my question, said that no one but themselves had been there."

"I have stood by the window in this room, right under the one above my apartment where the voices reached me, and was not able to hear a sound."

"It is, by long odds, the strangest case that ever came to my knowledge," commented Blake. "But, I say, perhaps you're a clairvoyant, or something of that sort—a medium, you know."

The horseman laughed, displaying as perfect a pair of teeth as the eyes of man had ever looked upon, and the keen orbs of the Fresh did not fail to note the sight.

"Oh, no; I do not think that I am anything of the kind; or, if I am, I am entirely ignorant of it."

"No, no; there is some natural reason—some law of nature which will account for this mysterious circumstance, and in due time I shall find out what it is."

"But to return to the conversation."

The speakers were the same two whose voices I had heard on the previous occasion. But this time, as they spoke with the utmost freedom, evidently without making any attempt to disguise their tones, I fancied that the voice of one of the speakers, the one who seemed to be the leader, was not unknown to me.

"But it was not an easy matter to recognize voices under such circumstances, for, owing to the peculiar circumstances of the case, the tones became hollow and sepulchral, as though the speakers were conversing at some distance underground."

"Ah, yes, I see; that supposition is very probable, too."

"If these fellows have some secret meeting-place underground, there may be a passage through the earth that conducts the sounds to you, on the same idea as a speaking-tube."

"Yes; that was the explanation that occurred to me, but still, I don't exactly understand it, for there is no underground apartment in the neighborhood that I know of, for there isn't any cellar under the ranch, for I took pains to make an examination."

"If your ranch is an old one, built by the Spaniards in the early days of Santa Fé, it may be that there are secret underground apartments; such apartments exist in the mansions that the mission fathers occupied in the old days, for they were a jolly set of fellows, partial to good wine, and also thrifty in collecting stores of gold and silver from the flocks under their charge, and a secret underground apartment would have been just the place for them to store their treasures away."

"I did not think of that," the horseman observed, after a moment's reflection.

"But now that I come to consider it, I should not be at all surprised if you have hit upon the true solution of the mystery."

"Leaving this idle speculation aside though,

I will come to the conversation which I was fortunate enough to overhear."

"One man, the master-spirit evidently, was called by the others captain, and he answered to the name of John."

"Aha!" exclaimed Blake, "that is indeed important information, and with that in my possession it ought not to be a difficult matter to fix the identity of the two."

"The conversation between the two only lasted a few minutes, and the purport of it was that the captain had found it was necessary to drive you from the town or kill you. This, you will see, was just the same as what I reported to you before, but when the man who was called John asked the other if he had formed any scheme in regard to the matter, the captain answered that he had."

"John then said that it would be a difficult matter to 'double-bank' you; that was the word he used, but I do not exactly understand its meaning."

"It is a slang term, applied when three or four men attack one."

"To double-bank is to attack with odds."

"I see; the captain replied that he had engaged men to attend to the work who would be sure to make a success of it."

"The other doubted, and gave it as his belief that you would be able to hold your own against a half a dozen ordinary men."

"I'm very much obliged to him for his good opinion," said the Fresh, with a laugh.

"And he, as well as all the rest, may be certain that I will do my best to deserve it."

"Then the captain stated that he had engaged five men to attend to your case who would be sure to be successful."

"And these five men?" questioned Blake.

"Are Indians of the Apache tribe."

"Hallo, hallo!" exclaimed the Fresh, astonished at this intelligence.

"You don't mean to say that this secret enemy of mine is going to put the red-skins on my trail?"

"That is the programme."

"There is indeed danger ahead," mused Blake.

"That is what I thought, and so I came in haste, regardless of the risk, to warn you," cried the rider, earnestly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE INDIANS APPEAR.

THERE was silence for a moment; the Fresh's gaze was cast upon the ground and he seemed to be debating some important matter in his mind, while the horseman's eyes were bent earnestly upon his face.

"So, despairing of being able to accomplish anything by the aid of white men allies, he intends to try what the red-skins can do," Blake remarked.

"Well, the idea is not a bad one; the game of the Indian will be of course to take me unawares and slay me without giving me a chance for my life," he continued.

"Yes, that was almost exactly what he said."

"But, thanks to your warning, I shall be upon my guard now. I would have been taken by surprise undoubtedly, for if I had encountered any Indians I should not have been apt to suspect danger from them."

"Did you hear the names of these noble red-men mentioned?"

"Yes, the name of the Indian with whom the bargain to assassinate you was made is Painted Bean."

"Well, that's an odd name even for a red-skin, and one not easily apt to be forgotten."

"This Indian—he is an Apache chief—and his four sons have been hired to kill you."

"I'll try my best to make them work hard for their money, and, thanks to your timely warning, they will not be able to take me by surprise; being on my guard I've not the least doubt I shall be able to hold my own against them."

"The bloodthirsty villains!" exclaimed the horseman, indignantly. "If they come to their death their blood will be upon their own heads. And now having delivered my warning I will be gone."

"Excuse me a moment!" exclaimed Blake, abruptly.

"There's a question I should like to put to you if you have no objection."

"If it is in regard to who I am, I beg you not to ask it. There are reasons why I wish to keep my identity a secret."

"You have been very kind indeed to take all this trouble for my sake, an utter stranger to you, and I really do not think I should be acting honestly with you if I did not warn you that I have penetrated your disguise."

"Is it possible?" asked the other, evidently annoyed.

"Yes, I recognized you on the occasion of our first meeting," Blake replied. "I have a very keen memory for both voices and faces, and seldom forget either the one or the other, but as I perceived it was your wish to remain unknown I did not deem it wise to tell you that you were recognized."

"But now that you have come again and ren-

dered me this signal service, I do not consider that it would be right to conceal the truth from you."

For a few moments the horseman was silent, his eyes bent upon the ground.

Then finally the gaze was raised and fixed upon Blake's face, while a smile of singular softness played upon the expressive features.

"It does not matter, but I thank you for your honesty in telling me."

"In order to warn you there wasn't any other course open to me than the one I adopted. I trust you will not think any the worse of me because I was brave enough to dare the risk?"

"Think any the worse of you!" the Fresh exclaimed. "Indeed I do not; my heartfelt gratitude is yours, and I sincerely hope the time may come when I will be able to show you, even at the risk of life, how much I prize your kindness."

"Let us not speak of this again—let us go on as if you did not know who I am, and as if I was not conscious that you possessed the knowledge."

"You may call me Jack, your honest, sincere friend, Jack, and now, good-night!"

The rider's hand was extended; Blake hastened to grasp it.

A moment the two palms touched, and then away went the horseman at a brisk trot.

"I must be a deucedly lucky fellow," the Fresh soliloquized, as he remained motionless for a few moments, watching the steed and rider as they disappeared from sight in the gloom of the night.

"I contrive to find friends everywhere."

"I came into Santa Fé without knowing a soul in the town, and now I can boast of a friendship which a king might envy."

"Decidedly I am in luck; my fortunate star must be in the ascendant, and that bodes ill for the success of my enemy's plans."

"And, by the way, who is this enemy—this secret, silent enemy who has determined to either run me out of the town or to kill me?"

"I must confess I am entirely in the dark. As far as I know since I came to Santa Fé I haven't interfered with anybody to such an extent that the town isn't big enough to hold both of us."

Blake had been slowly progressing back toward the hotel, while he had been indulging in these thoughts, and by the time he had finished the reflections which we have chronicled had reached the building.

The landlord, the jovial Jimsonweed, was enjoying a pipe at the back door when Blake came up, and the Fresh immediately proceeded to pump him in a most scientific manner in regard to the Apache chief known as the Painted Bean.

The host knew all about the notorious red-skin, and gave Blake a full history of the Apache chieftain.

"And where is he now?" asked the Fresh, carelessly, after the other had finished.

"Down on the reservation in Arizona," Jimsonweed replied.

"Oh, he don't hang out then 'round Santa Fé?"

"Oh, no; he drops in once or twice a year, mebbe, when he's up this way on a hunting trip, but not oftener."

"You see his stamping-grounds are too far off for him to run in hyer much."

"Has he been in town lately?" Blake asked, putting the question in such a way as to make it appear that he was merely talking for the sake of passing away the time and not because he had any real interest in the subject.

"No, I ain't seen him for I don't know how long—a good six months anyway."

Blake said no more upon the subject, but leaving the landlord to enjoy his pipe, sauntered around to the front of the house.

He had learned all that he wished to know.

The Indians had not yet made their appearance in Santa Fé; it was evident then that they were lurking somewhere in the neighborhood, and that the game they intended to play would be one of craft and not of open violence.

"I must be on my guard, or these wily red-skins may trip me," he murmured, as he joined the throng of loungers gathered in front of the Forty Rod Saloon, discussing the news of the day.

In a short time the landlord joined them, and the conversation turned upon shooting.

There were some "boss liars" in the crowd, and they now turned themselves loose—to use the Westernism.

To judge from the yarns they told, such wonderful marksmen as they were had never been seen before.

Only the Fresh was silent, and finally some of the boasters, noticing this, began to banter him with a view of drawing him out.

But Blake only laughed at the attempt.

"Oh, I ain't much of a shot, I reckon," he said at last.

"I s'pose I could hit the side of a house if it was big enough and not too far away."

Just then Jimsonweed happened to look down the street, and he immediately sung out:

"Oh, hold your hosses, boys; hyer come some red-skins! And if my eyes don't deceive me it's that old 'Pache son-of-a-gun, Painted Bean, and his kids."

All eyes were immediately turned in the di-

rection indicated by the landlord's gaze, and a quiet smile appeared upon the face of Blake.

As he had expected, the Indians had made their appearance.

The landlord had stated truly—it was the old Apache chief and his four stalwart sons, known respectively as Long Wolf, Little Gun, Funny Bird and Black Mustang.

The Fresh had decided upon his plan of action the moment he heard of the Indians' approach.

He had not the least doubt in regard to the truth of the information which he had received, and the unexpected appearance—unexpected by all the rest but himself—of the red-skins made him feel certain that the main object of their visit to Santa Fé was to carry out the compact which they had made to kill him.

It was his policy always to take the bull by the horns.

He never waited for an attack when he felt confident that a fight could not be avoided, but went in to get the first blow himself, being a firm believer in the old adage, the first blow is generally half the battle.

"Now you fellers have been shooting off your mouths about what crack shots you are!" Jimsonweed exclaimed, as the red-skins came up and halted in front of the saloon, "but hyer's the man that kin clean you all out."

"My money says that this hyer 'Pache chief is the boss shot of Santa Fé!"

"And my money says he ain't anything of the kind!" the Fresh of Frisco immediately cried, to the astonishment of the crowd, who hadn't expected this on account of Blake's keeping so quiet while the bragging was in progress.

The old savage's keen eyes surveyed Blake in the most careful manner from his hat to his heels, and there seemed to be a peculiar expression in his dark orbs.

"My brother is a stranger to the red-man," he replied.

"I can introduce myself. My name is Jackson Blake, and they call me the Fresh of Frisco! Put it there, old man."

He extended his hand. Painted Bean grasped it and then clinched his teeth tightly.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A BOLD DEFIANCE.

It was to prevent a moan of pain escaping from him that the old Apache chief clinched his lips, for the Fresh of Frisco in shaking hands with him had seized his fingers with such a grip that the bones seemed fairly driven in together.

In all his experience, and the old warrior had had a pretty extensive one, he had never encountered such a grip before.

"Glad to see you, my noble buck!" the Fresh exclaimed, still holding on to the hand of the Indian and squeezing it until the bones seemed fairly to crack.

"I love Injuns, particularly dead ones!"

By this time the crowd "caught on," to use the vulgate.

They perceived that the grip of the white man was making the red-skin uncomfortable, and they began to snicker.

At last the chief got his hand away, and a more angry red-skin never stood on mother earth.

"White man play the fool!" he growled.

"Painted Bean no like such tricks."

"Oh, that isn't anything to what I can do," Blake replied, with a sly wink at the crowd, who were enjoying the fun.

"I'm as full of tricks as an egg is of meat, and the more you draw me out the more there is to draw."

"The Painted Bean is a man—he cannot play the fool like a boy!" the Indian exclaimed, with great dignity.

"But look-a-hyer!" exclaimed Jimsonweed, at this point; "we're wandering away from what we were arter, it seems to me."

"We were talking of shooting, eh?"

"Yes, yes," exclaimed half a dozen of the crowd, in a breath.

"The Painted Bean will shoot with any man that walks the earth!" exclaimed the savage, with a defiant look at Blake, as much as to say that the challenge was intended for him in particular.

"Oh, you're a shooter, then?" the Fresh remarked, in a quizzical sort of way.

"The chief can shoot—"

"With your mouth," suggested Blake, greatly to the amusement of the bystanders, whose minds were just about intelligent enough to appreciate such jokes as this.

"With rifle and revolver!" answered the Indian, angrily, for the old warrior did not relish being made the laughing-stock of the crowd.

"The white man can laugh—can he fight as well?" questioned the red-skin, with a plainly perceptible sneer.

"Well, I don't know; that's something that can only be determined by an actual trial, but I reckon I can keep my end up; I generally manage to do so."

"Now, chief, I don't take any stock in your boast about your shooting abilities."

"Talk is cheap, but it takes money to buy land."

"Do you say you are a crack rifle-shot—"

"I am!" retorted the red-skin, quickly.

"So you say," remarked Blake, significantly.

"It is the truth!"

"Are you willing to back up the statement?"

"I am."

"With what?"

"With my life!"

"Aha, now you're talking! That's coming right down to old business."

"When a man says he will back anything up with his life it shows that he has confidence in his statement, that is if he means what he says and is not talking merely for the sake of hearing himself talk."

"The chief is no boaster; he means every word he says," the Indian replied, with great dignity.

"You are just the kind of man that I have been looking for then. Now I don't take any stock in your boast about your being a crack rifle-shot, and I'm willing to put my skill against yours, if you've got sand enough to come up to the rack and take your fodder like a man."

"The chief is full of sand," the red-skin responded.

"Have you got sand enough to back up your skill with your life, as you said?" Blake demanded, and at the question all the bystanders pricked up their ears, metaphorically speaking, so that they might not lose a bit of this interesting conversation.

"The chief wastes no breath—he means every word he said," the savage replied.

"Well, I feel so sure that I can flax you that I am willing to back my skill with my life," the Fresh remarked.

"The night is bright enough for us to see what we are about, so I propose we take our rifles, go off on the prairie and pop away at each other until one of us has enough of the fun."

This peculiar, off-hand proposition took the bystanders completely by surprise.

Here was a man proposing a trial of skill, which was in reality a duel to the death, to the most skillful and ruthless red warrior that had ever set foot on the western plains.

Even the Indian was surprised by the bold and novel proposal.

As the reader will remember, he had bargained to accomplish the death of Blake, and had visited Santa Fé for the sole purpose of contriving some way to get at the man whom he had agreed to slay in cold blood.

He had not expected to accomplish anything at present; his object now was merely to get a look at the man, so as to see what he was like and calculate what the chances were for catching him unawares at some future time.

But to be drawn into a discussion with him, and to be thus bluntly challenged to risk life against life was something that was entirely unexpected.

And the red-skin, despite his bull-dog-like courage, did not feel over and above pleased at the idea either.

Like a skillful and experienced general, he preferred to choose the battle-ground rather than have the fight forced upon him.

He was an excellent rifle-shot; it was no idle boast when he asserted he was a master-hand at the weapon, but for all he knew the white man might be fully as good, if not better.

That there were better shots than himself he knew full well, although he was not willing to admit the fact.

Then too, to fight a rifle duel by the uncertain light of the moon was not like engaging in a similar contest by the clear light of the day.

With all his years of border warfare the chief had but little experience in rifle-practice by moonlight, although he had been engaged in at least a hundred midnight attacks, but then all the fighting had been done at close quarters.

And as the savage hesitated Jimsonweed took it upon himself to speak.

"Why, look a-hyer!" he cried, "this is a reg'lar bloody, out-and-out duel that you are planning, and the odds are big that either one or both of you will get wiped out afore you get through."

"There isn't the least danger of that," Blake replied.

"We have both of us been blowing about our skill. Put us a thousand yards apart and neither one of us could hit an elephant without using up powder and ball enough to fill a four-horse team."

The bystanders did not exactly know what to make of this statement, for Blake spoke with a perfectly grave face, and if he was jesting, neither by voice nor manner did he give any indication of it.

They knew that as far as ordinary men were concerned the statement was correct.

"No one but a sharpshooter—an expert rifle-shot—would be able to damage a foe at so great a distance as a thousand yards."

"You see, fellow-citizens, I haven't got the least bit of a grudge against this red-skin," the Fresh explained. "Why should I have, seeing that I never laid eyes on him before in my life? And you haven't any grudge against me, have you?" and the question was put directly to the Apache chief.

Despite his long training in the art of duplicity, the warrior hesitated for a moment before he replied, for the suspicion shot across his brain that in some mysterious way the white-skin had learned of the agreement which had been made to kill him and was now leading the way to an accusation.

A moment's reflection convinced him, though, that this could not be possible, and so he answered, boldly:

"Why should the red-man wish evil to the white-skin upon whom his eyes have never rested until this night?"

"Exactly; don't you see, fellow-citizens, how the noble red-man chimes in with me?" the Fresh exclaimed.

"It's an utter impossibility for either one of us to wish evil to the other, unless there are some of you sharps base-minded enough for to believe that I have been hired by some one to 'go' for this warrior, or that some foe of mine has 'seen' the noble son of the wilderness and put up ducats enough to make it an object for him to attempt to wipe me out."

The Indian darted a quick, sharp glance at the Fresh with his black, bead-like eyes as he listened to these words.

Was it possible that his secret agreement was known, or was the white-skin by accident stumbling upon the truth?

"Oh, no, my beloved hearers," continued Blake. "We are just going into this thing for fun."

"There isn't the least bit of malice about it, is there, you red imp?"

"The chief is no imp, but a great red warrior," replied the Painted Bean, who did not at all relish either the words or the tone of the careless white man.

"Precisely, but after I get through with you, you won't think you are half as big a warrior as you do now."

The red-skin darted a furious glance at the impudent speaker, for the words made the bystanders laugh again.

CHAPTER XXV.

ON THE GROUND.

"If the white man could only fight as well as he talks he could whip all the world," the Painted Bean retorted, venomously.

"You just wait until you get a taste of my quality, and if it don't make you the sickest red-man that ever went on two legs then I won't want a cent."

"Let us make our rifles talk and save our tongues," the chief remarked.

"I'm agreeable; and now the terms of this fight are: first, the weapons to be rifles and the distance a thousand yards."

"After the word is given we are at liberty to advance and fire as often as we please until one man is satisfied."

The lookers-on thought this was about as cold-blooded an arrangement as they had ever heard of, and yet the Fresh rattled it off as coolly and with as little concern as though he was arranging the details of a picnic, instead of a duel to the death.

"That will do," the warrior remarked, with a dignified bow of the head.

"And let my white brother understand, that if he thinks this fight is child's play, the chief does not, and will shoot to kill."

And the Indian hissed out the words with a fiend-like air.

"Oh, don't you worry yourself about that; I'm going in to cut your comb and trim your feathers for you in the most approved style, and after the opera is over I reckon you will wish that you had tackled a cyclone instead of yours truly, to command."

"But I say, who's got a rifle to lend me, for that is an article I don't possess."

Then the voice of the fat saloon-keeper, Jimsonweed, rose in the land.

"I've got the finest rifle that ever a man handled!" he cried.

"That's no better tool west of the Big Muddy than my pop-gun!"

"Just wait a minute and I'll fetch it!"

And away he galloped into the house.

The red-skin carried his rifle slung upon his back, and so it did not take him long to prepare for action.

In a few minutes the host of the Forty Rod Saloon was back with his "gun," and the Fresh, examining the weapon with the eyes of an expert, saw that Jimsonweed had not overpraised the tool, for it was indeed as fine a rifle as any one could ask for.

"That's a we'pon as is a we'pon!" the host declared, proudly.

"You kin risk your life on that 'ere tool and it won't go back on you nary time!"

"Well, I'll try and not disgrace either you or the weapon," Blake declared.

"And now let's be off and begin the fun. Jimsonweed, as you're about as well-posted as any critter 'round you'll be a good man to pick out the ground."

"Wa-al, now, you kin bet your bottom dollar that I kin do that to the queen's taste!" the saloon-keeper replied, and then, followed by the others, he led the way to a broad, open plain, a short distance from the hotel.

"This hyar is as fine a bit of ground for real, actual business as kin be scared up out of doors, I reckon."

"It suits me first-rate," Blake observed.

"Ugh!" grunted the red-skin, "it is a fine place to kill a man," and he cast a demon-like glance at his opponent as he spoke.

"Say, is there any particular place where you would prefer to have me plug you?" the Fresh asked.

"It don't make any difference to me, you know; I had just as lief plug you in one place as in another."

"All you have to do is to indicate the particular spot and I will put a ball there with the utmost promptitude and precision."

"Ugh!" grunted the red-skin, who was more annoyed by these taunts than he cared to show.

"There is only one place where I shall try to hit you, and that is in your heart. My rifle-ball will split it in two."

"It's lucky for you that you didn't make up your mind to aim at my head, for no rifle-ball that was ever run would make any impression upon my cast-iron cheek."

This sally raised another laugh, which caused the Indian to grunt out something in regard to the white man "playing the fool."

With all of his vast experience the Apache chief was puzzled.

Never in his career had he encountered such a man as the Fresh of Frisco.

His lively sallies and peculiar off-hand way would seem to indicate a man from whom in a serious matter little could be expected, for on the frontier the light-hearted jokers are not the men upon whom the community leans in the hour of danger.

And yet the jester had fairly rushed into this quarrel, just as if it was one of the greatest jokes in the world to confront a determined foe, rifle in hand, at a thousand yards.

True, at such a distance there was not much danger, but then as by the terms of the fight the opponents were at liberty to advance and fire as many shots as they pleased, it was clear that the thousand yards would speedily be reduced to a hundred.

And the only decision to which the chief could come to in the matter was that the free-talking white man was either a fool who did not know the full extent of the peril he was encountering, and had rushed into the affair looking upon it in the light of a joke, or else he was a man brave to rashness who had in some way learned that in the Apache chief he could only look for a foe, and had made up his mind to bring the matter to a speedy issue.

This fair and open duel was not exactly what the chief had bargained for, and he was not pleased with the prospect.

His idea had been to remove the white man in a secret manner, and to so arrange the affair that he need not run any risk.

The average Apache is as brave as a lion, and no man who knew anything of the Painted Bean could possibly doubt his courage, but it is the savage policy never to risk life if a foe can be harmed otherwise, and although when forced to it they can stand up and fight even against great odds, as well and bravely as any warriors that the world has ever seen, yet it is altogether against their traditions so to do.

To the Indian mind there is nothing unfair or dishonorable in ten or twenty attacking two or three.

That is the chance of war and must be expected, and they will wait and plan for days to bring about such a result, and in their minds great praise is due to the warrior, wise and cunning enough, to succeed in attacking his foes with all the advantage on his side.

But in this case the fight had been forced upon the chief: the duel had been none of his seeking.

The foe whom he sought to destroy had chosen the weapons—but to this he did not object, for he was as well-skilled in the use of the rifle as any other arm which could have been selected—but the time and place of meeting had also been of his opponent's choosing, and this did not suit the chief at all. The more he thought the matter over the more he became convinced that the wily white man had succeeded in gaining a decided advantage, and he was greatly enraged.

It was too late now to do anything, and if he had been familiar with the noble works of the Bard of Avon, with Macbeth he could have exclaimed:

"They have tied me to a stake, I cannot fly,"
"But bear-like I must fight the course."

Jimsonweed, always anxious to have a finger in every pie, suggested that it was necessary that some one should act as master of ceremonies; this idea was received with favor, and one of the bystanders anxious to curry favor with the man who controlled the leading saloon of the town made a motion that Jimsonweed assume the duties of the position.

This idea met with general approval—saloon-keepers are generally popular with the masses—and although Jimsonweed at first pretended that he would rather be excused, saying: "Oh, thar's a heap of men in the crowd who can double-discount me in sich a position!" yet he

finally yielded with a good grace and accepted the office.

"Now, then, fellow-citizens, since you all seem to be of the opinion that I ought fer to see to the running of this hyer circus, you kin jest bet your bottom dollar that I ain't the man to go back on you."

"I'll run this consurn jest as well as I know how, and I reckon no man can do better than that!"

"That's correct!" chorused the crowd.

"If I understand this hyar thing, the distance is to be a thousand yards, and arter the word is given either man can advance as fast as he likes and fire as many shots as he pleases, and the fight is to be kept up until one or both are laid out, or satisfied to quit."

"That is the way I understand the programme," Blake said, with an inquiring look at the dusky warrior.

The Painted Bean had become more and more dissatisfied with the state of affairs, and the stronger grew his impression that he had been entrapped, but as he couldn't see any way in which he could get out of it he was forced to go on, although terribly enraged at his own stupidity in allowing the cunning white man to so easily trick him.

But as there wasn't anything to object to in the arrangements, he was compelled to nod his head in acquiescence, although if he had been free to follow the dictates of his own judgment he would have objected to the whole thing.

"Well, that's the hull business in a nutshell!" Jimsonweed exclaimed.

"That's all there is to it. I'll pace off the distance, while you fellers kin load your we'pons and git ready for the fun."

"Then, arter you are placed and ready, I'll fire a shot from my revolver as a signal for the fun to begin."

"Of course, boys, it's understood that thar's to be fair play and I'll shoot the first man that interferes on either side."

The bystanders expressed their approval of this and then the men got into position.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DUEL.

THE opponents took their places and proceeded to load their weapons.

And when this ceremony was ended, Jimsonweed who had eagerly watched the proceedings, inquired:

"Are you all ready?"

"Ready!" responded Blake.

"Me ready," said the red-skin.

"Go it ye cripples!" yelled the saloon-keeper, discharging his revolver in the air as he spoke.

And then came an extraordinary performance on the part of the Fresh which amazed all the beholders, and none more so than his Indian opponent, for the moment the report of the pistol rung out on the still air of the night, down on his face went the Californian! Extended at full length, hugging the earth like some huge snake!

If the master of ceremonies had not fired his pistol in the air, one might have imagined that by some mischance the bullet had struck Blake.

The moment the report of the pistol rung out clear and shrill, the Indian brought his rifle up to the shoulder, preparing to draw a bead on his foe, but this movement on the part of the other puzzled him.

Of all difficult shots, to hit a man stretched out flat on the earth, is one of the most difficult.

It would not be an easy matter even to the experienced rifle-shot—the man skillful enough to make bull's-eyes at a thousand yards, when aided by the clear light of day, but when the uncertain rays of the moon must be depended upon, the task was ten times more difficult.

But the Indian, standing like a statue, with his dark figure outlined against the horizon, offered a fair mark, as the Fresh soon proved to the intense disgust of the red-skin.

The moment he was down, the Californian brought his rifle to his shoulder and taking careful aim fired.

The result of the shot proved that Fame, with her thousand tongues, had not lied when she said that the Fresh of Frisco as a rifle-shot had not a superior in the known world, if indeed he had an equal.

Vast as was the distance, uncertain as was the light, yet the leaden ball tore through the brawny left shoulder of the savage; not a severe wound, as it just grazed the shoulder-bone, merely cutting through the flesh.

A half an inch lower down, though, and the missile would probably have crippled the left arm of the chief for life.

As it was it gave the red-skin the most acute pain when he attempted to use his arm.

In describing the Indians the reader will perhaps remember that we have said no braver men ever trod the earth than these dusky warriors of the Apache tribe.

Their apparent cowardice in lying in wait for an unsuspecting foe and attacking him in overwhelming numbers, is due to the manner of their warfare, a custom handed down from ancient ages, not to the fact that they are afraid to dare the risk of an open hand-to-hand fight.

Like the wild Arab of the Eastern desert, whom the red-skin wanderers so much resemble, the braves are trained from early childhood to regard war as their natural avocation, and are taught to believe that there can be no death so grand as that of the painted chief, dying upon the field of battle with his face to the foe.

That we have not overstated the case, the action of the Painted Bean after receiving his wound amply proves.

Understanding that the cunning white-skin had contrived to place him at a terrible disadvantage, and that he could not hope to cope with him at rifle practice at such a distance, the red warrior shrilly gave forth his war-cry—the note of defiance dear to the hearts of the dusky-hued warriors of his tribe—and then he ran forward toward his snake-like foe.

His idea was to reduce the distance so that he might have some chance of contending with his antagonist, who had shown himself to be such an expert rifle-shot.

As he ran forward, though, he was shrewd enough to adopt a zig-zag course, thus materially lessening the danger of his being hit by the shots of his antagonist as he advanced.

Blake laughed to himself as he beheld this desperate expedient resorted to by his savage foe.

"It's the only hope for him, though," he muttered, as the savage came racing onward.

"Not that there is much of any chance for him," he continued, "for in this fight the advantage is all on my side."

"As a general rule I don't care to lay out the men I happen to run afoul of, unless they are ugly brutes who are better out of the world than in it; but this red-skin butcher who coolly plans to take a human life with as little reluctance as he would exhibit in treading upon a venomous snake, deserves to be taught a lesson, and I reckon that I am just the man able to do it."

The bystanders watched the scene with anxious eyes as they noted the reckless, mad advance of the red-skin.

Each moment they expected to see the little white puff of smoke and the bright burst of flame followed by the sharp report from the rifle of the Californian, telling that the death-dealing bullet was on its way to find a billet in the body of the red-skinned warrior.

But the Fresh remained as motionless as though by some magic he had been turned into stone, until the Indian was within about five hundred yards and then he sprung nimbly to his feet.

The red-skin halted and brought his rifle up to his shoulder.

This was the opportunity he sought—the chance for which he craved—a fair shot at the white man for whose life he hungered.

But the dusky warrior "reckoned without the host," for the Fresh did not intend to give him an opportunity for revenge.

When it came to shooting, he calculated to get the first crack himself, and as he was by long odds a far quicker man with the rifle than his dusky opponent, he had no trouble in succeeding in his design.

His rifle sprung to his shoulder the instant he gained his feet, and it did not seem to rest there hardly an instant when the flash of the powder and the sharp report denoted that the leaden missile was on its way.

The rifle of the savage had only just reached his shoulder when the Californian discharged his piece.

The Indian was not what is called a "snap shot" by any means, and on this present occasion the painful wound in his shoulder made him slower than usual.

The Fresh was a good shot at a thousand yards, and a still better one at five hundred.

And on the present occasion it was his game to disable the red-skin—to inflict upon him so severe a wound that it would be a lesson and teach him not to essay the trade of the assassin again.

So he fired with a deliberate purpose in view. His aim was true—the shot struck home.

The savage dropped his rifle as though he had been stricken with an electric shot, threw up his hands and clawed at the air for a moment while a convulsive groan came from his lips, and then he fell forward on his face, writhing in what seemed to be the agonies of death.

There was a solemn hush.

The Fresh had joked so about the matter—had treated the affair with so much levity, that the spectators had really looked upon it more in the light of a jest than anything else, and not until the red chief fell, evidently badly wounded, did the idea strike them that they had been witnesses to a duel where human life was at stake.

Not one of the throng had counted upon seeing the grim figure of Death stalk in among them.

The silence was rudely broken.

The four young red bucks, the sons of the old chief, all wrapped in their blankets as though they were extremely chilly, had watched the affair with true Indian calmness; but now, realizing that their sire had been badly, if not mortally wounded by the laughing white

man, a burning desire to avenge his slaughter took possession of them.

With wild cries of rage they threw aside their blankets and drew their revolvers—each and every one of the young bucks was splendidly armed, although the huge blankets which they wore disguised the fact—and rushed toward the Californian.

The Fresh was not caught napping though, for the very moment that the Indian yells broke the stillness he was on his guard against just such a movement.

All the spectators were to the right of the duelist, and the Indians huddled in a group at the extreme end of the line, so that the whites were between them and the man for whose blood they thirsted.

And the moment the red-skins threw aside their blankets and began to brandish their weapons, the townsmen prepared for action.

Out came their weapons and they hurried forward to place themselves between the red-skins and the man whom they intended to attack.

Jimsonweed was in the advance.

His revolver was already drawn for he had not replaced it in its holster, so intent had he been in watching the progress of the fight.

"Hold on thar! W'ot are yer 'bout?" he yelled at the top of his voice as he hastened to intercept the angry red-men.

"Hold yer hosses if you don't want to have me eternally salivate yer!"

"Durn yer red skins! This yere was to be a fair fight, and we won't have no gum-game 'bout it!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

FOUR TO ONE.

AND then the crowd took up the cry.

"A fair fight—no gum-games!"

There were some thirty odd townsmen on the ground and the confidence inspired by their number encouraged them to present a bold front to the enraged red bucks.

And the red-skins, when they realized that they would not only have to encounter the victorious white-skin, who had stretched their sire senseless upon the ground, but also all the citizens in battle array, sensibly came to the conclusion that against such odds they could not hope to contend, so they came to a halt and contented themselves with hurling a shower of "cuss words" at the triumphant white man.

"Oh, let 'em come on, boys!" exclaimed the Fresh, who with his repeating rifle, every chamber charged, with the exception of the two the contents of which he had bestowed upon the Painted Bean, felt perfectly confident he could handle the red-skins without the least difficulty.

"Let 'em come on, and see how quickly I'll wipe out the four of them."

"What do I care for their pop-gun revolvers?"

"The bullets from my rifle will drop them all in their tracks long before they can get within revolver range."

The red-skins looked at each other.

This statement was no idle boast, as they well knew after the display which they had witnessed of the speaker's expertness with the rifle.

It was only the simple truth.

As good a rifle-shot as the Californian would have very little difficulty in picking them off one by one as they rushed to the attack long before they could get near enough to render their revolvers effective.

The townsmen had come to a halt when they perceived that the red-skins had abandoned their design of attacking the Fresh, and they also looked at each other in amazement when they heard the novel proposal.

They felt satisfied, too, that Blake meant exactly what he said.

There wasn't any bravado about it; he felt certain he could easily vanquish the red-skins, and about all of the bystanders were of the same opinion.

"Oh, but that ain't the fair shake!" Jimsonweed exclaimed.

"We guaranteed that you should have a fair show for your money, and I for one don't call it a fair show if we let four of them jump on you at once."

"No, no!" chorused a half-dozen of the crowd, "four to one ain't a fair shake."

"What is the difference so long as I'm agreeable?" asked the Fresh.

"These copper-colored galoots have got it in for me now, since I've downed their old man, and the grudge between us will have to be settled some day, and I would much rather have the thing settled now than push it off to some distant date."

"But, in the first place, if there's a doctor in the crowd, I move that he take a look at the old buck, for I don't think he's killed outright, although he may be, but that wasn't my game at all."

"I wanted to disable him so that he wouldn't be apt to come gunning round again after a decent white man in a hurry, and so I put a ball through his shoulder; but still, as you never can

tell exactly about these things, it may be possible that my bullet has gone an inch or so wide of the mark and plugged him for keeps."

"But if it is so, it's an accident and ought not to count against me."

As luck would have it, Doc Limberlegs was in the crowd, and he at once stepped forward.

"Hyer I am," he said, "and as it's early in the evening, I reckon I'm all right to attend to any professional duties."

And then he grinned at the rest, as much as to say that if it had been about midnight, it wouldn't have been of any use to call upon him to look after any matter of moment.

"Take a squint at the old buck, and see if there is any life left in him," Blake said.

"And then after he is fixed I stand ready to give these four red roosters the squarest deal they ever got in their life."

"I'll fight the whole four single-handed, not with rifle against their revolvers, but with my pair of pistols I'll face them, and they must either lay me out or else I'll make stiff's out of them."

A fierce look and yet one wherein satisfaction was displayed appeared on the dusky faces of the warriors, while the townsmen looked at each other in amazement as though they could hardly bring themselves to believe that they had heard correctly.

To encounter so renowned a warrior as the old red chief at a thousand yards with rifles was a rather hazardous feat, but now to dare to meet his four sons, who bore the reputation of being as "bad Indians" as could be found in the whole entire West—to encounter all four at once, without asking for any advantage in weapons was to attempt a feat that few men in the town of Santa Fé would have even dreamed of doing.

"Wa-al, it is your say so of course," Jimsonweed remarked.

"And as it is your soup I reckon that thar ain't any call for anybody else for to stick a spoon inter it."

"W'ot do you say, bucks, is it a go?" he continued, turning to the red-men.

Long Wolf, as the eldest, took it upon himself to speak for his brothers.

"It is good!" he replied. "The red-men will drink the heart's blood of the pale-face."

"There's another galoot who wants to indulge in an expensive drink, as if whisky wasn't good enough for him," exclaimed Blake, as the red-skin concluded.

"Well, I'll take a look at the old buck and then you can go on with your picnic as soon as you please," Limberlegs observed, and he started toward the spot where the old chief lay.

As the Fresh had stated, the red-skin had been wounded in the shoulder, an ugly hurt too, but not surely fatal if the man had proper care.

Jimsonweed and about half of the bystanders followed the doctor, curious to learn how badly the Painted Bean had suffered at the hands of the bold white man who had thus expertly proved to the doubting savage that a man could play the fool and yet be able to fight as bravely as a tiger notwithstanding.

The shock of the wound had caused the Painted Bean to faint, but when the doctor proceeded to apply a bandage to stop the flow of blood the old chief came to his senses again.

He realized that he was badly hurt, and his first question to the doctor, who was an old acquaintance, was in regard to whether the wound was mortal or not.

Limberlegs replied that he didn't think that it was, if he took care of himself, and then the chief, after glaring around him for a moment at the rough faces peering down at him full of curiosity, yet not one betraying the least sign of sympathy, said:

"And the white-skin—what is he? a mighty medicine-man to be able to strike the red chief to the dust without giving him a chance to shed blood?"

"I reckon he is pretty big medicine when it comes to shooting-irons," Limberlegs replied.

The doctor had a high opinion of the skill which had been displayed by the stranger, the more so perhaps because the doctor was essentially a man of peace, and had never been known to have a weapon or to become mixed up in a row since he struck the town.

"He is a white devil, and what man can fight a devil?" the old warrior asked, full of the superstition of his race in spite of his years and experience.

"That will be bad for your young bucks, then," Limberlegs observed.

"How?" asked the Indian.

"Why, when your kids saw that he had downed you, they were a-going for him, but the boys kinder allowed that that wasn't the fair shake; he was willing to have it, though, and the upshot is, he's challenged the hull four to fight him with revolvers."

"All at once?" asked the Indian, an incredulous expression upon his dark face.

"Yes, all at once; one down, t'other come on!"

A grim look of satisfaction appeared upon the chief's countenance, and the doctor, noticing it, said:

"You don't appear to be much alarmed about your young men."

"They are great braves, every one, although only boys in years."

"I am old, my medicine is weak; they are young, their medicine is strong, and they will kill this white snake who hid in the grass like an adder to bite the heel of the red chief."

"Is he mad, this white man, to think he is able to meet four such warriors as my Apache braves in single fight?" inquired the chief, in lofty scorn.

Limberlegs shook his head.

"Don't you crow too soon, chief," he continued. "You don't know this man yet, although you have had a sort of introduction to him."

"I tell you what it is, he's by long odds the toughest critter that ever struck this town, and I would be willing to bet a big stake that he gets the best of this fight although it is four to one."

"Can you not lift me up, so I can see with my own eyes my young men kill this white snake?" asked the Indian.

"Oh, yes, but don't blame me if you are disappointed," the doctor remarked, dryly.

Then he assisted the savage to rise to a sitting posture, a movement which drew from the old chief a grunt of pain, despite his efforts to refrain from betraying the suffering caused by his wound the moment he was moved.

"Now then, gents and fellow-citizens all, I reckon we are 'bont ready for the circus to begin," Jimsonweed announced.

"Are you fixed for war?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A ROYAL FIGHT.

THE question met with an affirmative answer from both of the contending parties, for all of them had taken advantage of the pause to examine their weapons and prepare for the battle royal to come.

The four Indians were armed with two revolvers apiece, excellent weapons they were too, Remingtons, navy-size, such tools as were furnished by the Government at the time of which we write to the soldiers in the cavalry service, especially to those detailed for service on the frontier.

And each and every revolver had been wrested by the red right hand of savage force from some trooper, who had fallen a victim to the ruthless savages whom he had been detailed to conquer.

But these pistols were not self-cockers as were the elegant tools that the Fresh wore belted to his waist, and in this the Californian had an advantage, but then the red-men had eight revolvers to his two, and so the odds were in their favor.

Yet, in spite of this fact, there were plenty of adventuring men among the spectators who were willing to bet six to four on the Californian, and the few who believed that the red braves would prove the victors in the fight were not willing to back their opinion with much wealth.

Jimsonweed was the most sanguine of all the crowd in the belief that the Fresh would prove the victor in the fight.

He had become so impressed with the idea the Californian was a marvel that he declared:

"I'd be willing to back that critter ag'in' a hull regiment of common men, if he was agreeable for to fight them, for I tell you, gents, that fellow has got a long head onto him, and he ain't a-taking any extra big risks now, I kin tell you!"

"He's the clear white stuff all the way through, and he's got as level a head as ever sat on a man's shoulders."

"He knows w'ot he is about—he knows w'ot he kin do and w'ot he can't, and if he didn't feel mighty sart'in that he kin clean out these yer red bucks he wouldn't take the contract for a cent!"

There were very few of the crowd who did not agree with the saloon-keeper in this opinion, but they lacked the necessary sand to back their words with the solid stuff.

So there wasn't much betting on the fight, for the ones who were inclined to back the Indians were "afraid to put up their ducats," as the saloon-keeper remarked.

After both of the parties in answer to Jimsonweed's question had signified that they were ready, the saloon-keeper gave the word.

"Now then, one, two, three, b'ile in thar, all on yer!" he fairly howled, so excited had he become in regard to the matter.

The red chiefs were prompt to act.

They had taken advantage of the interval to concoct a plan by means of which they hoped to make their superior numbers give them a fearful advantage.

They had seen enough of the Fresh of Frisco to understand that in facing him they were encountering a desperate and determined foe, one, too, possessed of more than ordinary skill, so they had resolved to take all possible precautions against a defeat.

The game they had determined to play was the old Indian one over again.

The favorite mode of attack which the red-men of the West almost invariably employ when proceeding against a foe, occupying a fixed position, and who seems likely to make a desperate resistance.

The moment the word was given the red-men, who had been clustered in a knot like so many bees, rapidly separated, and while one remained motionless the other three struck off at the long, loping trot, the favorite mode of progression of all savage nations.

Two went to the north and one to the south, but when they got a certain distance away the three commenced to bend in toward the spot where the Californian stood, motionless, waiting for the attack.

The strategy of the red braves was now apparent.

Using the Fresh as a central point, they intended to draw a circle around him, getting a man at each of the four quarters of the compass, and then close rapidly in upon him.

Of course it was not in the power of mortal man to face four foes, coming from four different points, at the same time, and while the Californian was occupied with one, or two at the best, the others, coming upon him in the rear, could easily accomplish his destruction.

This peculiarly savage mode of attack had cost many a poor traveler over the vast prairies of the West his life, and in this instance it really seemed as if the Californian, despite his skill and courage, would fall a victim to the cunning trick of his foes.

But this was one of the instances where a pair of self-cocking revolvers were worth a hundred of the common weapons which do not possess the double action.

Blake understood the game of the red chiefs the moment they commenced to play it as well as though he himself had had the planning of it.

In this case the central point around which the savages circled was no emigrant train of "parked" wagons, so situated that they could not be moved, and the besieged men must, perforce, remain quiet, and allow their wily adversary to play the game in their own manner.

Blake was a free agent, tied to no stake, but could go where he pleased.

So, when the Indians were well separated and had begun to circle around him, he surprised everybody, the bystanders as well as his savage foes, by making a sudden dash at the Indian who had remained motionless while his brothers had set out to surround the white-skinned foe.

Blake was an uncommonly good runner, and started for his man at a pace which made them all open their eyes.

The red-skin was perplexed.

This was a move in this game of life and death which was entirely unexpected, and for a moment he knew not what to do.

The other three were equally surprised, and they came to a halt, uncertain how to act in this novel situation.

The first Indian threw a glance behind him, half inclined to retreat from the foe who was so rapidly advancing, his idea being that by retreating he could draw Blake after him and so give the others a chance to close in on him from the rear.

But then the thought came to him that in this curious kind of a foot-race, if the white-skin chanced to be a better runner than he—and from the way the pale-face was coming on it looked as if he was—the enemy would be able to dispatch him with a shot in the back and then turn and encounter the others, who would not gain a single bit of ground by this movement.

So the savage determined that the best thing to be done was to stand his ground and fight.

He, stationary, would surely have a better chance for a shot than his adversary advancing at full speed.

Therefore the young chief, who was the Black Mustang, the youngest of the brothers, set his teeth firmly together and awaited the onset.

When Blake came to a certain point which the Indian judged was in revolver-range, the chief raised his weapon, took careful aim, and fired.

In the excitement of the moment the chief miscalculated.

Blake was not within range, and the bullet—a good line shot, by the way, although at least a yard too high—struck the ground some twenty feet in advance of the runner.

Blake soon covered the twenty feet, and then, catching his foot in a slight hole in the ground, tumbled headlong to the earth, just as the revolver of the red-skin exploded for the second time.

The timely fall saved the Fresh of Frisco from a wound, more or less serious, for the revolver-ball passed directly over him as he went down, so near that Blake could hear its shrill song as it whistled by him.

A yell of triumph came from the lips of the Black Mustang as he beheld Blake go down all in a heap, apparently half stunned by the shock.

The yell was echoed by the other three in shrill cries of triumph, for now the red-skins believed that the chance of fortune had delivered the reckless white man into their power.

The Black Mustang ran toward the prostrate man at his topmost speed, determined to get so near that when Blake attempted to rise he could seal his doom with a single shot.

The bystanders thrilled with excitement.

With open mouths they gaped.

Never since the founding of the old town of Santa Fé, dating away back to the early days when Montezuma reigned—or even before his time, when the strange people, whom we only know through tradition and earth-covered relics, now brought to light by the patient toil of the ardent explorer bent upon delving into the mystery of the past—was such a contest witnessed in the neighborhood of the ancient city.

The Fresh of Frisco was on the ground, had rolled over half on his back, evidently stunned by his heavy and unexpected fall, and the exulting savages, with brandished revolvers and loud cries of triumph, were closing rapidly in upon him.

What could save the dauntless Blake?

CHAPTER XXIX.

PLAYING 'POSSUM.

"AHA!" cried the old chief, in savage glee, to the doctor who held him up so that he could see the fight; "the Great Spirit has given the bold white man into the hands of the red braves. Soon their bullets will pierce his heart, their knives will drink his blood and his scalp will hang and blacken in the smoke of an Apache lodge."

Doc Limberlegs looked doubtful.

"Mebbe your bucks will scoop in the 'pot,'" he remarked. "I must admit that it looks a good deal like it now, but this is a mighty onsart'in world, and you can't always tell which cards will come up trumps in the deal, or which one is most likely to slip out of the faro box a winner."

"You see, chief, I'm a mighty good judge, for I have wasted many an hour and many a ducat trying to solve these hyer problems; but what puzzles me 'bout this hyer affair is how on earth did the cuss get such a tumble as to lay him out stiff as a poker—Jerusalem!"

In utter astonishment came the abrupt exclamation from the lips of the doctor.

And the incident which had occurred was enough to call forth the cry of amazement.

The Black Mustang was within a hundred yards of the prostrate man; the other three about two hundred yards away.

All of a sudden there came a flash, followed by a sharp report from the revolver in the Fresh of Frisco's right hand.

And now the bystanders understood it all. Blake had been playing 'possum to lure his adversaries within easy revolver range.

And being such a master of the weapon it was as easy for him to fire with accurate aim from his reclining position as though he stood upright.

Down went the Black Mustang with a bullet through the chest.

A yell of rage escaped from the throats of the other three red-skins as they witnessed the deadly accuracy of the white man's aim, a buzz of astonishment from the amazed crowd, and a grunt of anguish from the old savage.

"The snake—the snake!" he cried, in bitter, impotent anger.

"Didn't I tell you that you had better not count your chickens before they were hatched?" the doctor cried.

"I tell you this is a mighty onsart'in world, and it isn't safe to yell until you are out of the woods!"

Brief time though had any of the spectators or actors in the scene for reflection, for no sooner had the Fresh disposed of the Black Mustang than he turned his attention to the others.

Blake did not attempt to rise, for such a really wonderful marksman as he was, used to all sorts of fancy shots, it was just as easy for him to draw a deadly "bead" extended on the ground, sprawling on the flat of his back, as for an ordinary marksman to shoot in the usual way.

Long Wolf was the nearest one of the three, and Blake marked him for the next victim.

But while the Fresh was taking aim, for the Californian was acting as deliberately in this matter as though it was merely a shooting-match at a target for sport, the red-skins enraged at the fall of their brother, who had gone down like a lump of lead and had never moved after falling, so that it seemed probable that the bullet had slain him, discharged half a dozen shots at the prostrate man.

The Apaches were tolerably fair marksmen, but they were not used to shooting at such a peculiar target, and then, too, as they did not stop to take aim, but fired as they ran, none of the bullets damaged the Californian, though some of the leaden missiles buried themselves in the ground dangerously near to his person.

As we have said, six shots the red-skins fired, but the seventh report that broke the stillness of the air came from the trusty six-shooter of the Fresh of Frisco.

And when the bystanders witnessed the result of the shot it seemed to them as if the skill displayed by the Californian was something more than human and that some invisible demons of the air must be aiding the stranger.

The moment after the shot was fired the Apache chief, Long Wolf, threw out his arms convulsively, and then with a groan of pain

pitched forward, falling heavily upon his face, and when he reached the ground he rolled over on his back, clutching at his breast like a man in mortal agony.

A long, hard-drawn breath came from the lips of the bystanders as they witnessed the sight.

Never had any one of them seen a more thrilling scene, and yet there were old pioneers in the throng who had set eyes on many a strange sight in the wild Western wilderness.

A groan was wrung from the lips of the aged chief as he beheld the downfall of his eldest born, in his opinion the equal of any warrior that the Apache land had ever known.

These two effective shots had wonderfully changed the character of the contest.

Instead of four to one, it was now one man against two.

It did not, under these altered circumstances, seem to be such an uneven thing.

Indeed, after the display which they had witnessed, there was hardly a man among the lookers-on who did not consider the fight about as good as ended, although, under ordinary circumstances, two to one would be considered great odds for any foeman to contend against.

But the easy manner in which the Californian had disposed of two of his enemies had thrown a glamour over the senses of the witnesses, and they were now in a condition to believe that he could do almost anything.

Jimsonweed was the most extravagant of them all.

"It's all over but the shouting!" he declared, using the old expression so common in the mouths of the racing men of the olden time.

"I'll bet a thousand dollars to a cent that he will lay out these two red bucks alongside of the first two, and he won't have to more than half try, either!"

A thousand dollars to a cent was big odds, and yet not one of the crowd manifested any disposition to accept the bet.

Upon beholding the unceremonious way in which Long Wolf had been stricken out of the fight and compelled to bite the dust, the other two red-skins came to an abrupt halt.

The same thought had simultaneously occurred to both of the young warriors.

They were quite near enough now to such a wonderful shot, and there wasn't anything to be gained by getting any nearer.

The only chance for them was to come to a standstill and endeavor, by taking careful aim, to disable or kill the foe who had proved to be so dangerous.

The Fresh of Frisco, though, was up to their game, and took immediate measures to frustrate it.

No sooner had they come to a halt, and before either one of them had time to draw a "bead" on him, than the sharp crack of his death-dealing revolver rung out on the air.

The two chiefs were about equally distant from him, and equally distant from each other, the three forming an almost perfect triangle.

Funny Bird was about two hundred yards from Blake, in an easterly direction, and Little Gun about the same distance away to the south-east.

The Californian had marked Little Gun for his prey, but this time, through some defect in the cartridge, the bullet did not go as straight as it should, and instead of receiving the ball in the chest, as the Fresh had intended, the Indian got it in the thigh.

The wound brought him to the ground in short order, as Blake had designed it should, but it did not disable him, as the Fresh had intended.

"Aha! 'the snake is scotched not killed!'" he muttered, guessing from the peculiar way in which the Indian fell that he had received the bullet in the lower part of his body.

"The reptile will be able to use his revolver the moment he recovers from the shock, about as well as though he was uninjured."

"I will have to waste another ball on him."

And while he had been thus soliloquizing he had been taking aim at the remaining warrior.

The chief on his part had been doing his best in this line also, and as a result the two fired so nearly at the same time that there was but one report.

Funny Bird was the poorest shot of all the four brothers, and although he had plenty of time to dwell on his aim, he only succeeded in hitting Blake in the fleshy part of the left arm.

But the bullet of the white man, on the contrary, pierced the chest of the savage, and with a gasp of pain he tottered over backward.

"He's cleaned out the hull gang, by gosh!" Jimsonweed exclaimed, unable to restrain his amazement.

But the fight had not ended yet, for the wounded chief, Little Gun, rose to a sitting posture, and, taking deliberate aim, fired his revolver.

The shot was well aimed and designed to pierce the stomach, but the chapter of accidents willed that it should strike the handle of the bowie-knife in Blake's belt, and although it inflicted a severe bruise it did no material damage.

Quickly, though, did Blake return the favor.

Springing to his feet he discharged his weapon, and, with what looked like a careless snap shot, put a ball into the throat of the red-skin which was his passport to another world.

The old warrior sunk back in agony. "A devil—a white devil!" he moaned; "what can a man do against a devil?"

The contest was ended. Two of the braves were slain outright and the others severely wounded.

CHAPTER XXX.

* OLD BULLION IS ASTOUNDED.

At the end of the fight, the townsmen, in their delight at the easy triumph which the Fresh of Frisco had achieved against such odds, would have made a regular lion of him.

In fact, they proposed to form a procession and carry him on their shoulders around the town.

"Just as the ancient Romans and the rest of the heathen cusses used to do when one of their chief cooks and bottle-washers came home from a raid in foreign parts," Jimsonweed explained.

The saloon-keeper rather prided himself on his knowledge and claimed to be the best-educated man in the town.

Blake declined the honor with thanks, but he had hard work to get out of it, so eager were the others to do him honor.

"I only wanted to teach these red-skins a lesson," he explained.

"I may be wrong in my surmise, of course, but I got the idea in my head that they came to Santa Fé on purpose to pick a quarrel with me, and when I run afoul of a job of that kind I always make up my mind to make it as lively for the parties as I can.

"I am as peaceable a man as walks the earth, but when I am waked up I reckon I can be as ugly as the next man, and I don't care where you pick him up."

The crowd were quick to protest that they fully agreed with the speaker in regard to the correctness of this statement.

As a compromise, finding that the citizens were determined that he should accept some sort of an ovation at their hands, Blake went to the Forty Rod Saloon and had half a dozen glasses of wine with his admirers, and then, with great firmness, tearing himself away, went to bed, leaving Jimsonweed to do the honors and relate to every group of new-comers who came to the saloon, attracted by the news of the contest and eager to learn all the particulars, how the Fresh of Frisco, single-handed, had whipped five of the best Pache warriors who had ever breathed the wild Western air.

Early on the following morning the news of the conflict came to the knowledge of the alcalde.

The intelligence was brought by Santilla, the captain of police, who deemed the affair of sufficient importance to warrant him in riding down to the Marmaduke ranch in order to post Old Bullion in regard to it.

The old cattle king listened attentively.

"Why, this man is a regular demon in a fight," he remarked, after the chief of police had finished his story.

"So it would seem."

"I know these Indians well, and any one of them I should take to be fully a match for any ordinary man; and the idea that this fellow should be able to clean out the whole five, and without any particular trouble too—first, the old buck, and then the four young ones—why, I'll be hanged if it isn't wonderful!" the alcalde exclaimed.

"Two of the bucks were killed in the fight, you know, and there's grave doubt if one or both of the others will not die.

"Limberlegs thinks the old chief will pull through though."

"The old rascal is too tough to be killed by anything short of an earthquake," Old Bullion commented.

"I suppose it will not do to allow this affair to pass without taking some notice of it?" the chief of police observed, in a reflective sort-of-way.

"Eh?" said Marmaduke, in a tone of question, "I don't exactly understand what you mean."

"There's been two men killed in the fight, and I suppose we ought to have this Fresh of Frisco up and have a trial so as to see whether he was justified in wiping out the two or not," Santilla suggested.

"The two men were Indians, and Indians don't count out in this country," the alcalde replied.

"Yes, but it seems to me that we ought to take some action in the matter," the chief of police urged.

"Old fellow, you've got a little grudge against this stranger, and it sort of confuses your judgment," the alcalde answered.

"You think, maybe, that you would be able to make some trouble for him about this affair, but I tell you, you are barking up the wrong tree, if ever a man was.

"It was a fair fight, and he took the risk of big odds, too; if the men he wiped out had been as white as he is, it wouldn't make any difference as long as it was a square deal all round;

but when you come to talk about doing anything to a white man for killing a couple of red-skins in a fair fight, why, old fellow, you might as well go out on the prairie at night and try to whistle down the barking of the coyotes.

"No, sir, if we take any notice of the skirmish it will be to present the cuss with the freedom of the town, or compliment him with some such honor; but if we were to attempt to make an offense out of the thing we would be the laughing stock of all Santa Fé."

Santilla affected to be satisfied, and after some casual conversation took his departure, but the shrewd-eyed alcalde saw that he was greatly annoyed and went away in a decidedly bad humor.

"There's trouble ahead for my bold chief of police, if he isn't careful," Old Bullion remarked, commencing with himself after the other had departed, and from the window he watched him ride down the trail toward the town.

"I should think that the test he has already made of the quality of this fellow would satisfy him, but some men are like hogs, they never know when they get enough.

"He will be apt to fool around this cheeky rascal—who has the skill and courage of a devil though—until there's another fight, and Santilla may not be lucky enough to come out of the second contest with as little damage as from the first."

Then the alcalde was silent for a few minutes, his mind busy in reflection, until the dark figure of the chief of police vanished in the distance.

"I begin to believe that I have made a mistake about this fellow," he said at last.

"I thought that he would make a very good husband for my girl, but now I begin to doubt it.

"He is acting like an idiot about this Fresh of Frisco.

"As far as I can learn he was to blame in the quarrel that took place between them. The other fellow was too shrewd for him, and he was donkey enough to think he could get square by forcing a quarrel on the other.

"It was the old story; he went for wool, and returned shorn.

"By Jove! I never thought of that!" he exclaimed, abruptly, as a sudden idea flashed into his mind.

"It may be that he is jealous of this fellow; I remember now he had a suspicion that this stranger was inclined to be sweet on my girl, and he half-hinted that she might look with favorable eyes upon this brazen-faced scamp.

"It's all nonsense, of course, but if the idea has taken possession of him it would account for his foolish actions.

"No, no, friend Santilla; you are a good enough fellow and make an excellent captain of police, but you will not do for my peerless girl.

"You have not brains enough to mate with my beauty.

"I am sorry now that I gave him any encouragement when he spoke to me on the subject, but luckily there is not much danger of Isabelle taking a notion to him.

"If he had my influence to back his suit it would be a different matter. I might be able to persuade the girl to receive him as a lover, but as it is, if I am referred to in the matter, I shall be obliged to use my influence in the opposite direction."

And the old cattle-king nodded his head sagely and smiled to himself, for he had that pleasant conceit so agreeable to fathers, that his will in any matter of the heart would be as law to his blooming child.

But it is not always so, as many a parent has discovered to his cost.

For fully a good half-hour the alcalde mused upon the subject, and then the idea occurred to him that it would not be a bad plan to have some little conversation with his daughter about it so he caused her to be summoned.

She came, and when questioned in regard to Santilla expressed surprise at the idea.

"He certainly has been polite and attentive, but I supposed that was on account of the official relation he bore to you," she observed.

"The other day he spoke about the matter and as I did not see any objection to his suit so long as it found favor in your eyes I told him that I would not interpose any obstacles."

A frown gathered upon the brow of the girl, and she looked anything but pleased at this announcement.

"It is not possible, father!" she exclaimed, quickly.

"Mr. Santilla is a very pleasant gentleman, very good company, indeed; I respect him as a friend, but he can never be anything more to me."

And the decided manner in which the girl spoke fully convinced the old cattle-king that she knew her own mind and had no doubt whatsoever about the matter.

"Well, I am not sorry that you think in this way, for he is not exactly the kind of man I should select for your husband."

"Oh, no; my union with him would be impossible."

And with this decided expression the girl withdrew.

"That settles Santilla," old Bullion remarked, with a great deal of satisfaction apparent in his tone.

"My chief of police will have to go and look for a wife elsewhere. I don't doubt he will lay all the blame on this dare-devil of a Blake, and if he don't put a bridle on himself will be apt to get into trouble, for this cheeky scamp would not find it much trouble to chaw up the chief, judging from the way he settled the red-skins."

At this point the alcalde happened to glance out of the window.

"Talk of Satan and he appears!" he cried.

And surely enough the Fresh of Frisco on horseback was approaching the ranch at a brisk gallop.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A STORMY INTERVIEW.

WHEN he reached the ranch the Fresh inquired for the alcalde, saying that he desired to see him on particular business, and was forthwith conducted to the presence of the cattle king.

The alcalde was curious to learn what the Californian wanted, and after discovering his approach had summoned one of the servants and bade him be in readiness to receive the stranger, so it was that there was no delay in Blake reaching the presence of the cattle king.

"Aha, Señor Alcalde, I trust that I have the pleasure of finding you in the best of health?" Blake said, accepting the chair which the servant, at a signal from Old Bullion, had placed for him.

With a wave of his hand the alcalde dismissed the man, for something whispered to the old cattle king that there wasn't any need of witnesses to the interview.

"I am in robust health, thank Heaven," Old Bullion observed.

"And I presume there isn't any need of my putting a similar question to you, for your little exploit last night, the particulars of which I heard this morning, would seem to indicate that there isn't anything the matter with you."

"No, I think I am tolerably well, thank you," Blake replied, in a reflective sort of way, as if he wasn't quite sure in regard to the subject.

"Are you in partnership with any graveyard company in Santa Fé, or have you got a lot of coffins that you want to work off?" the alcalde inquired.

"Oh, no, no business or speculation about it at all; I just got into these little rifles for fun."

"Fun, eh?" said Old Bullion, in a tone of question.

"Well, there ain't many men in this world who would think there was much fun in one man tackling four others in a duel-to-the-death fight."

"And yet men who have plenty of money travel all over the world for the sake of a little bit of excitement."

"Well, if they run across any chaps of your kidney I reckon they get all the excitement they care to encounter," Old Bullion observed grimly.

"Yes, possibly. I must admit that I have found Santa Fé to be a pretty lively town ever since I have been in it, and that reminds me, alcalde, I have come to see you on a particular matter of business to-day."

"Go ahead!"

"Well, in the first place, what do you think of me?" asked Blake, bluntly.

Old Bullion stared for a moment, and then answered, equally as bluntly:

"I think you about the biggest and cheekiest scamp I ever set eyes on."

"Now don't be hasty, you know," observed the Fresh in the most serious manner possible.

"Don't jump to a rash conclusion. Do you feel perfectly sure in your own mind that I am the biggest scamp you ever struck?"

"Yes, I do; your cheek is perfectly colossal."

"Well, that's good; that's satisfactory, that is. That is the point I always aim for. I always try to be at the top of the heap, if I can possibly get there," the Fresh remarked, complacently.

"In my mind there is not the least doubt about it. You are the cheekiest customer I ever run across, and I have met with a heap of men in my time."

"When I get ready to leave Santa Fé, you will, I suppose, be willing to give me a recommendation to the next town?"

"A recommendation?" said the alcalde, puzzled.

"Yes, you might couch it in these words, you know: 'The bearer of this, Jackson Blake, better known, perhaps, as the Fresh of Frisco, is the biggest scamp I ever ran across.' Then sign your name to it, Martin Marmaduke, alcalde of Santa Fé."

"What are you driving at, anyway; what is the meaning of this nonsense?" demanded Old Bullion, impatiently.

"I only want to get at your honest opinion of me, that's all."

"But I will not trouble you for the recommendation, though, for I haven't any idea of leaving this ancient burg; not for the present, at any rate."

"I like the town, and the town seems to like me, and I have made up my mind to settle down here, and, as alcalde of the ranch, I have come to you for counsel."

"Counsel?" exclaimed Marmaduke.

"Yes, advice, you know. In the first place, I wanted to find out what you honestly thought of me."

"Your opinion, I take it, will be the reflex of the town."

"You think I'm a scamp of the first water—*ergo*, the town thinks so, too."

"That is all right then; I have attained the height of my ambition in that line; further I cannot go."

"Now, I propose to try another tack. I want to see what sort of a figure I shall cut in trying to be an honest, quiet citizen and an upright man."

"I have been a sport and sharp long enough. I have made a small fortune in the business, and now, like the sinner on the death-rack, I propose to reform."

"I want to get into some nice, quiet business, and I am not at all particular in regard to what it is, so long as I can make a decent living at it. I have ample capital to start me, and I thought that in your official capacity as alcalde of the town you would be able to give me some good advice in regard to the matter."

Old Bullion looked sharply at the quiet-faced sport.

He had a suspicion that there was something back of all this; but what it was he could not guess.

"Humph—well, I don't really see how I can be of service to you," he observed.

"I don't know much about trade, anyway. My business is raising cattle, and there isn't much money in that for any one, unless they are prepared to go in on a big scale."

"If you could raise fifty or sixty thousand now, there's a ranch next to mine here which could be had for that money, and I think ducats could be made."

"I can raise the money," replied the Fresh, placidly.

"You can?"

"Yes, without trouble."

"You are better heeled than I thought."

"You've got that amount of money, haven't you?"

"Yes, and double it ten times!" replied the old cattle king, with conscious pride.

"That is exactly what I reckoned on. I'll play poker with you and win fifty or sixty thousand."

"No, you won't!" roared the alcalde, in a voice of thunder.

"You have skinned me once, and hang me if I'll ever give you a second chance!"

"Now what is the use of a man trying to reform if you're going to throw such obstacles as that in his path?" exclaimed the Fresh, in an injured sort-of-way.

"See here, what on earth are you up to anyway? There's some gum-game back of all this! You know there is!" the alcalde declared.

"I have told you nothing but the truth. I am tired of being considered a card sharp only. You know the world thinks there is great difference between the man who plays cards for sport to pass the time away, no matter how high he bets, and the unfortunate wretch who gambles that he may live."

"I want to become an honest member of society. I haven't made a business of gambling since I came to Santa Fé, and there isn't any reason why I shouldn't leave my old life all behind me, and begin a new one here against which the tongue of slander cannot rail."

"Come, alcalde, will you not give me a chance? Don't you need an overseer or something of that sort on your ranch?"

"I'm a good rider, and can fling a lariat as well as any Mexican that ever coiled a rope."

"I'll work for low wages and do my best to make myself useful to you."

"I might possibly find room for you in my mines, a hundred miles to the south," observed the alcalde, reflectively.

"Oh, no, thank you; that wouldn't do at all," replied Blake, quickly.

"And why not?" questioned the alcalde, in astonishment.

"I don't want to leave Santa Fé."

"Oh, you don't," and a peculiar expression appeared on the face of Old Bullion.

"No, I like the town; I'm quite comfortable here, and I have made up my mind to settle down for a time, anyway."

"There's some reason back of this; you cannot pull the wool over my eyes," Marmaduke declared.

"I'm too old a bird and have seen too much of the world."

"What does such a man as you care for a town except for what he can make out of it? All towns are alike to you so long as you can continue to feather your nest well."

"You say you come to me for counsel and yet you are not acting honestly with me."

"Oh, yes, I am," Blake asserted.

"You haven't give me your true reason for wishing to stay here."

"Of course it really isn't any of my business, but since you have come to me for advice I cannot very well give it unless I know all the facts in the case."

Blake hesitated for a moment, and then he looked the alcalde straight in the eye.

"Perhaps what I have to say will not be agreeable to you."

"Well, you can judge of that better than I until I know what it is," Old Bullion replied, a dark look on his face which evidently meant mischief.

"I suppose I might as well make a clean breast of it, come what may!" Blake exclaimed, decidedly.

"Hear the truth, then; I stay in Santa Fé because I love your daughter Isabelle!"

With a cry like the roar of a wild beast Old Bullion jumped to his feet and sprung straight at the throat of the Fresh of Frisco.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE TUG-OF-WAR.

BUT Jackson Blake was not to be taken by surprise.

Like the practiced swordsman he had been watching the eyes of the alcalde and saw the intention to attack written there before Old Bullion made a movement.

So, as Marmaduke leaped at him, displaying all the fury of a wild beast who fancied that his prey was about to escape, the Fresh rose to meet him, and Old Bullion did not succeed in gaining the least advantage by his sudden attack.

The two men closed in a lusty grapple.

Apparently the cattle king had a decided advantage.

He was taller than his antagonist, larger every way, weighing at least fifty pounds more, and to the thinking of a man who was not a judge in athletic matters all the chances were in his favor, but a veteran sportsman would have decided otherwise.

The extra weight was bone and fat, more fat than bone, a disadvantage, rather than otherwise, while Blake was in as good condition as a pugilist who had gone through a long course of careful training in anticipation of an important contest.

There was hardly an ounce of fat upon him. A follower of the fistic art would have declared he was in condition "to fight for a man's life."

The alcalde, despite his years, was possibly the stronger man of the two, but then to counterbalance this advantage, he had but a slight knowledge of the wrestler's art, while Blake, on the contrary, was an expert in all the tricks of this peculiar profession.

In his wild life of adventure he had wrestled with all sorts of men and under all kinds of conditions, and from each and every adversary he had learned something.

And Blake was an apt scholar, too, in this sort of thing and possessed the wonderful faculty of picking up a trick of this kind in a few minutes that an ordinary man would puzzle hours over.

So the advantages were decidedly with the younger man.

Old Bullion, too, had failed signally in his attempt to take the other by surprise.

It had been his idea to grasp the stranger by the throat and give him a good choking for his impudence.

Then, too, the alcalde was not free from conceit which whispers to the average man that he can succeed where a fellow-mortal has failed.

So far the Fresh of Frisco had easily beaten every man in Santa Fé with whom he had come in contact.

It would be a big thing—to use the common expression—if he, the alcalde of the town, should succeed in getting the best of his "tough customer"—if he could prove to him that there was one man in the town who was his equal, if not his master.

Old Bullion was only a fair shot with either rifle or pistol, could not boast of any skill with the knife at all, but he was wonderfully strong, and believing he was far superior in his physical gifts to Blake, he calculated that if he could succeed in closing in with the other he could easily master him, so had resolved to make the attack.

His first move though was not a success.

He had designed to seize Blake by the throat. If he could once get his strong hands on the windpipe of his adversary he felt sure he could choke him until the other would be glad to cry enough.

But though he sprung directly at Blake's throat he did not manage to reach the mark.

The arms of the other were in the way and as he felt the strong grip of the Fresh of Frisco tighten on him, he suddenly realized that the task he had undertaken was not going to be as easy a one as he had anticipated.

The stranger was evidently a foeman worthy of his steel.

They struggled up and down the floor, entwined like two huge serpents.

The alcalde had given up his idea of choking the other and had made up his mind to "throw"

him, a task which he thought he would not fail to accomplish, being so much the stronger and heavier man.

To this end then he bent all his energies, essaying to get a "crook" on Blake so as to twist him off his feet, but in some mysterious manner the Fresh managed to wriggle out of every tight place into which the alcalde got him, before the older man could exert his strength for the final effort.

Great drops of perspiration began to gather on Old Bullion's brow; not for years had he taken any such violent exercise.

He began to puff and pant, while his adversary did not seem to be in the least disturbed by his exertion.

The alcalde felt that his strength was beginning to desert him.

The violent and unaccustomed exertion was telling on him.

He felt that the point was rapidly approaching when it must be now or never, and then he began a series of mighty struggles, nerving himself for a supreme effort.

The thought that the Fresh of Frisco might prove the victor in this contest, which he himself had provoked, was as gall and wormwood to him, and so he essayed with all his might to cast the other to the floor, intending to add his own weight to the fall, and so crush his nimble antagonist.

But, try his best, he could not accomplish his purpose, although he strained every muscle in his body, and then all of a sudden he realized that Blake had managed to get a peculiar hold upon him.

He essayed desperately to break the serpent-like "lock" of his antagonist but could not.

Blake had twisted him on his hip, then there was a sudden jerk—the alcalde felt that his feet were leaving the floor—and down he went with a crash, flat on his back, his adversary adding his weight to the fall.

The head of Old Bullion struck the floor with a terrible thump, and for a moment or two the shock stunned him.

When he recovered his senses, he found that Blake was sitting astride of him with his left hand twisted in his neck-tie, which was a plain silk handkerchief which he wore loosely knotted around his neck in sailor-fashion, so that by pressing the knuckles of the fist into the throat it was possible to half-strangle him, and the other fist, viciously doubled up, was thrust menacingly under his nose.

"You miserable scallywag of an alcalde, how dare you attack a gentleman in this manner?" Blake demanded.

"Let me up," gurgled Old Bullion, half-strangled.

"Not by a jugful!"

"You'll strangle me!"

"You ought to be strangled, you wretched old rascal!"

Old Bullion was white with rage.

"Oh, if I only had a chance, you scoundrel!" he stammered, so exasperated that he could hardly speak.

"You've got a chance; what are you complaining about, you unhung horse-thief? You've got a splendid chance—to be hammered until none of your friends will know you. I reckon that it's my say-so this time!"

And as he spoke the Fresh of Frisco swung his muscular fist in the air as though he intended to let it fall directly on the prominent nose of the alcalde.

"You miserable scoundrel, don't you dare to strike me!" cried the alcalde, the other having in a slight measure relaxed the pressure of his throat so he could speak.

"Dare to strike you! I'm going to smash you all to pieces!" replied Blake, and again he brandished his fist in the air.

"If you dare to strike me I'll murder you when I get up!" Old Bullion cried, almost choking with anger.

"Oh, that's all right! I'm not a-going to let you get up," the Fresh replied, coolly.

"I'm going to pound you for awhile and then I'll cut your throat!"

"I could wind up your earthly career with a revolver-ball just as well, you know, but the report of the pistol would make a noise and might attract some witnesses to the scene, the cold steel, though, does its work quietly."

"And after I settle your hash, there will be a good chance for me to run for alcalde, and I reckon I will make a heap sight better one than you, you miserable old goat-stealer!"

"You're crazy!" cried Old Bullion, who really began to believe that the man was not in his right senses, so matter-of-fact was he in his manner as he made known his bloodthirsty design.

"That's a good idea. I can kill you and then swear I did it in a crazy fit."

"But hold on!" exclaimed the Californian, abruptly.

"I forgot; I can't kill you; you're the father of the girl that I want to marry one of these days."

"Never!" cried Old Bullion.

"Oh, yes, I will; we'll fix that all right between us, she and I, and if you cut up rusty it will be time enough to wipe you out then."

"You can get up!"

And with the word Blake released the alcalde, and resumed his seat.

Old Bullion rose slowly to his feet, considerably the worse for the brief encounter, and seated himself in his chair, gazing at Blake with an expression which plainly denoted that he did not know what to make of him.

"Now, then, father-in-law that is to be—"

"Never!" growled the alcalde, angrily.

"Well, we won't discuss the question now, although you'll find that I'm going to have the girl after I have made a name for myself."

"Do you mean to say that you and she have come to an understanding unknown to me?" cried the alcalde.

"Oh, no; I never said a word to her on the subject in my life. I have confidence though, that if I set out to win her she will not be able to resist my persuasive ways; but I thought I would speak to you on the subject first."

"I'll never consent."

"Well, I will have to get along without it then."

Blake rose to his feet.

"There isn't any bad blood between us, I hope?"

"Well, no," the alcalde replied, slowly. "But if you come after my girl there will be."

"You must not blame the moth if the light attracts him; take care of yourself. So long!" And Blake departed.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ENOUGH IS AS GOOD AS A FEAST.

AND NOW we will transport the reader to the little sheltered glade up in the foot-hills where the Indians had pitched their camp, and where we introduced the old Apache chief, the Painted Bean, and his four stalwart sons to his acquaintances.

Luckily for the red chief, who had suffered so severely in the fight, a deputation of two warriors of Painted Bean's band arrived in Santa Fé the next morning in search of the old chief.

They had come to tell him that as a new disposition had been made of the troops in the neighborhood of the reservation of Painted Bean's band, there was a fine opportunity for a quiet raid upon the white settlers a hundred miles to the southward without much danger of detection.

The braves arrived just in time to carry their wounded brothers to the camp in the hills, the chances being good that they would not be in a condition to make the journey to the reservation for two or three weeks at the best.

Doc Limberlegs made a visit to them every other day, and under his care the wounded men soon improved.

Contrary to his first anticipation, none of the wounds threatened to prove dangerous, and he said, confidently:

"Within three weeks you will be able to travel, and in about three months you will all feel like yourselves again."

The old chief improved more rapidly than the rest, and soon got so he could sit up and even move around a little.

It was a bright moonlight night, and the Painted Bean sat on a rock, gazing downward over the valley, looking toward Santa Fé, but the town was too far away to be within the range of vision, although by day the smoke rising from it could be plainly distinguished.

The two warriors had gone to Santa Fé in quest of supplies, the young braves were asleep in their skin wigwams, and the old chief, in solitude, was deep in meditation.

A horseman came in sight, coming up the trail from Santa Fé, and riding directly toward the camp.

The Painted Bean watched him attentively as he approached.

It was the thought of the old warrior that the horseman was no stranger to him, and this supposition was correct, for as the rider drew near he proved to be the disguised stranger—the Chief of the Bloodsuckers—who had made the bargain with the Indian which had resulted so disastrously to the red-skins.

The horseman rode into the camp and dismounted, the old chief perfectly passive all the while.

This was the first time that the stranger had made his appearance since the day when he had made the agreement with the savages.

"Well, how do you find yourself, chief?" the horseman asked, as he took a seat upon a projecting rock, a yard or so distant from where the old warrior sat.

"Bad—much bad," replied the Indian.

"The scheme didn't work worth a cent, eh?"

"No work."

"Mighty funny thing about it, too," observed the stranger, musingly.

"The cuss seemed to have a suspicion that you red bucks meant mischief the moment you came into the town."

"Yes," said the chief, with a nod.

"He didn't give you a chance to get in any fine work, but he went for you immediately."

"Yes, quick to dare the red-man to war."

"It is a mighty strange affair, and the more I think about the matter the more I am puzzled,

How in the name of all that is wonderful did he suspect that you had come to Santa Fé for the purpose of looking after him?"

"You didn't say anything to any one about it?"

"No, the chief never opened his mouth," the savage replied.

"Even my young braves did not know. I came to see what the white chief was like so I might know how to strike him."

"Is the fellow a wizard, then, who can scent danger in the air?"

Painted Bean shook his head; the conundrum was too much for him, and he promptly gave it up.

"The whole thing may be only accidental, but it is mighty strange, anyway."

"It is strange," responded the warrior, gravely.

"Well, there isn't any use crying over spilled milk," the other remarked.

"When we miss fire, the only thing to be done is to put on fresh caps and try again."

"Try again," coincided the brave.

"I don't suppose that you will be in a condition to do anything for some time."

The Indian shook his head.

"The Painted Bean will not be able to go on the war-path for many moons."

"But I suppose you can arrange it so that some of your warriors can take up this fight."

"You have two more from the reservation here now, I understand."

"Yes; two good braves."

"Don't you think you can fix some plan so that these two warriors can succeed in taking this fellow by surprise—catch him, you know, so that he will not have any chance for his life?"

"Of course you are just hungry to revenge the death of your sons."

The old chief shook his head slowly and a sad look came into his dark eyes.

"My braves are now in the Spirit Land—they chase the game in the happy hunting-grounds—it was their fate to die."

"The chief will be lonely without them, but it will not be for long."

"Soon the time will come for him to sing his death-song, and then he will join them never to leave them again."

"But first you must have revenge," urged the other, craftily.

"Revenge?"

And as the brave uttered the word he shook his head.

"Yes; revenge on the man who slew them."

"It cannot be," replied the Painted Bean, decidedly.

"And why not?" asked the other, surprised at the assertion.

"This man's medicine is too great—he is not a man; he is a devil—a white devil—and what red chief can fight a white man's devil?"

"Oh, nonsense! there isn't any such thing!" The aged warrior cast a contemptuous look at the speaker.

"It is easy to talk," he said. "If the tongue could kill, many warriors who now live would be dead."

"This man is no more a devil than I am!"

"Go fight him then."

The other bit his lip; the counsel did not please him.

"There are reasons why I cannot mix myself up in this matter; but I am willing to pay liberally to accomplish his death; but I did not expect that you would attack him openly. I thought your game would be to take him at a disadvantage and not give him a chance for his life."

"Not for all the yellow stuff that was ever dug out of the earth would the Apache chief dare the power of the white devil again," responded the old savage, solemnly.

"Why, the fellow has taken all the steel out of you!" the other exclaimed in undisguised annoyance.

"His medicine is too great—the red brave does not live who can match it."

"Perhaps these two warriors of yours may be willing to risk it, provided they are well paid," the stranger suggested.

"No, no; they have heard how he beat the Painted Bean and his young braves and they will not dare."

A bitter curse rose to the lips of the disguised man as he listened to this unwelcome intelligence, but with an effort he kept it back.

"How about the other scheme in regard to which I spoke—about carrying off the girl, you know?"

"Will your young men be willing to undertake that job?"

"Why not? That is as nothing compared to fighting this white devil."

"I wish you were well enough to look after the matter yourself."

The old chief shook his head.

"It will be many moons before the Painted Bean will be able to lead his warriors again," he replied.

"Well, I'm sorry for it, chief, but if these two young men of yours are good warriors—"

"None better in the Apache nation!" protested the chief.

"They will be able to do the job then without

a doubt. I will arrange all the details myself, and plot the thing out so carefully that it will be sure to succeed if they obey my orders."

"They are good braves, bold on the war-path and wise in council."

"You shall talk to them—lay out the trail, and they will follow it faithfully."

"Good; that is what I want, and if they do we cannot fail."

"How soon?"

"I cannot tell exactly, the time is not yet ripe, but soon it will be, and then I will let you know."

"In the mean time you can talk the matter over with your young men, so that when I come again everything will be understood."

"The chief will do it."

The stranger rose and then vaulted into the saddle.

"I cannot tell how soon I will come again, for it depends upon circumstances beyond my control, but it will not be many days, I fancy. So long!"

And away the horseman went.

When he gained the plain, his thoughts translated themselves into words.

"No further aid can be expected from the red-skins. The Bloodsuckers then must try their luck; but no open fight this time, though the odds are ten to one."

"This accursed Blake must be ambushed and shot down like a dog!"

And with this murderous design in his heart the horseman rode straight for Santa Fé.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE SECRET ASSASSIN.

AND NOW we will allow old Father Time to wing his onward flight for a good seven days, before we again take up the thread of our story.

Nothing of interest to our readers has transpired during that time worthy of being detailed at length.

Blake had gone into business.

He had purchased a half-interest in a general store kept by an enterprising Hebrew, one Moses Cohen, and a brand-new sign, painted by the cunning hand of the Fresh of Frisco himself, was affixed to the front of the building and bore the inscription:

"COHEN & BLAKE.
GOOD GOODS CHEAP FOR CASH."

This movement was the source of considerable wonderment to the townsmen, and Jimsonweed, taking it upon himself to voice the general amazement, consulted the sport.

"Say, Mr. Blake," he took occasion to remark, taking advantage of what he considered a favorable opportunity to obtain the information which he sought, "I know that it ain't any of my business, but do you know there's an awful lot of talk around town about your buying an interest in this hyer store of Cohen, and they do say that the Jew cuss got considerably the best of the deal."

"Oh, there's always somebody around to make such remarks," the Fresh replied, carelessly. "What Cohen asked and what I gave him is a matter that concerns only us two."

"I don't doubt that Cohen thinks he made a good deal, for trade has picked up wonderfully, so he says, since I took a position behind the counter."

"I don't doubt that in the least, for thar was a good many in the town that wouldn't believe it was so, even when they heard it. They reckoned that a man of your kidney would never be contented with storekeeping, and so they came to see for themselves."

"Thought I was too wild a bird to settle down, eh?"

"Yes, that is about the size of it."

"These wisecracks are not always correct. The truth of the matter is, I bought an interest in the store so as to settle down."

"I don't want the town of Santa Fé to look upon me in the light of a sport only. I want them to consider me one of the sober business men of the place—a fellow who has settled down here to cast his lot with Santa Fé and grow up with the town."

"Oh, yes, I see; but thar's a heap sight more money for you in your sporting life."

"Yes, I shouldn't be surprised, but I can take a hand in a game of poker now and then, just for the fun of the thing, you know, and no one will have the right to make mouths at me. That is one of the odd things that we meet with in this life."

"If I depend upon card-playing to get me a living I am a gambler, and every one looks askance at me."

"Even the very men that I play with at night pass me by with an extremely cool nod if they happen to meet me in the street the next day."

"There is a sort of a taint upon me. I am in a great degree a social pariah, and the world at large avoids me."

"But if I am a storekeeper, a tradesman, a doctor or lawyer, I can play cards all night long and bet as heavily as I like, and if it comes to the knowledge of the set in which I move

they will laugh at the matter as if it were a good joke for me to fling away at night the substance for which I toil during the day, and if any remark is made, ten to one it will be the saying:

"Oh, well, all men are a little wild sometimes."

"That's truth, every word of it," Jimsonweed exclaimed.

"But the reason for the thing is simple enough; it's the sheep and the wolves over again."

"The gamblers are the wolves, and the outsiders are the sheep, and you really can't expect the sheep to have a good word for the fellows who are going to devour them."

"There's a good deal of sense in your simile, excepting that the sheep don't run after the wolves and the would-be sports do after the gamblers."

"Can't allers hit exactly, you know."

"Well, I have become a sheep, but if anybody picks me up for a flat, I pity them, that's all."

"But as to my motives for going into this thing, why, I should feel obliged to you if you'll say to every one whom you may happen to hear speaking of the subject that the sole reason is, I am tired of leading a wild, roving life and have determined to settle down and become a respectable citizen, one against whom no man will have cause to say a word, and there's the whole thing in a nutshell."

Jimsonweed promised to do what he could to "carry the news to Mary," as he expressed it.

And he attended to the matter so faithfully that inside of a day all Santa Fé was in possession of the knowledge that Jackson Blake, the Fresh of Frisco, was a changed man—had abandoned the sport's trade forever and had settled down to business with the laudable ambition of having in time the biggest store in the town.

It did not take the news long to reach the alcalde's ranch, and Old Bullion smiled grimly to himself.

He thought that he understood the game the Fresh of Frisco was playing.

"This is his first move," he muttered.

"He has now become a respectable member of society, and when he comes as a suitor for the hand of any girl to whom he may aspire, no one will be able to throw in his teeth that he is nothing but a miserable card-sharp who ought to be ashamed of himself to dare to think of wedding an honest girl."

"The fellow means business, and the quicker I go to work to block his daring game the better."

Although he would not have been willing to acknowledge the fact, even to himself, the old gentleman had become impressed with the idea that Blake was about as difficult a man to "get away with" as could be found in all New Mexico.

The alcalde cogitated over the matter for an hour or so and then formed a plan of operations.

Some time before his daughter had expressed a desire to pay a visit to some of her school companions in the East, and the father had requested her to wait until he could make it convenient to accompany her, as he had some business in the East to which he ought to give his personal attention.

So now he went to her and said that, as it was impossible for him to set any definite time for his Eastern trip, perhaps it would be as well for her to go without delay and when she had gone the round of her acquaintance, and got ready to return home, he might be able to come on for her.

Isabella thought this was a good idea and said as much.

So it was arranged that in three days she was to depart, and the girl could not help thinking that her father seemed strangely anxious to hurry her off, contrary to his usual behavior in such a case, for always before he had tried to have her delay her departure as long as possible and never gave anything but a reluctant consent to her going.

She was wise enough, though, not to reveal her thoughts in regard to this matter to the old gentleman and the alcalde retired, chuckling in his sleeve, at the masterly strategy he had displayed in the affair.

"Absence breeds forgetfulness," he murmured when he had reached the sanctum again and resumed his old seat in his favorite easy-chair.

"I don't know as there is anything between the two yet; in fact I feel pretty certain that there isn't, and that is the reason I didn't say a word to Isabelle on the subject. I didn't want to put the idea in her head, for a young girl is a contrary creature sometimes, and if I had told her that on no account must she take any notice of this impudent scamp, perhaps that very warning would lead her toward him."

"No, no, no hint on my part shall put such a thing in her head."

"The fellow is going to work in a careful way, but the removal of Isabelle will be apt to upset all his plans, I fancy."

Leaving the father to chuckle over his brilliant generalship we will return to the Fresh.

Going into partnership with Cohen made quite a change in his personal arrangements.

Ever since his arrival in the town he had made the Forty Rod Saloon his headquarters, but now in company with the honest Hebrew he slept in the store and merely took his meals at Jimsonweed's hostelry.

"I hate to leave you," he had said to the host, "but I'm a business man now from the word go, and I must sleep in the store to protect my goods."

"Cohen is a first-class salesman; he can persuade a customer to buy an article that he has no more use for than a dog has for two tails as well as any man that ever stepped in shoe-leather, but when it comes to war, he's got to be counted out."

"But if I am on the ground the man who attempts to raid that store will have as good a chance for a fight as can be picked up in this world."

When this speech was reported around the town, all agreed that it was the truth.

With such a man as the Fresh of Frisco entrenched in the store it would take an army to storm the premises.

To even such a redoubtable force as the sheriff and his deputies defiance might be given.

Blake was leading a model life now.

All day long he was in the store, excepting when he went down to the hotel for his meals.

To half a dozen suggestions which had been made to him to come out and indulge in a little game of "draw" at night, after the store had been closed, he turned a deaf ear.

It was his custom after business was over at night to sit at the rear door with his partner, enjoy a cigar, and then go to bed.

And on this night of which we write, as usual the two sat smoking just inside the door, when a shot broke the stillness of the night, and a bullet knocked the cigar out of Blake's mouth.

A secret assassin was getting in fine work.

CHAPTER XXXV.

WHO FIRED THE SHOT?

THE Fresh of Frisco jumped back out of the doorway into the darkness, for there was no light in the rear part of the store, which consisted of a small room partitioned off from the main apartment for the accommodation of the proprietors.

A coal-oil lamp was kept burning in the store itself all night, the wick being turned down, and as there was an open door in the partition which separated the small apartment from the store, enough light came through it to enable the partners to dispense with any light in the small room.

But as this door was at the other end of the room from where the one which led into the open air was situated, the dim light from the store did not reach it to any extent.

The moment he heard the report of the weapon, and beheld the cigar shot from the mouth of his partner, the honest Hebrew went over backward in his chair in a terrible fright.

"Ough, ough!" he howled.

"Quit your noise—you're not hurt!" cried Blake, drawing his revolver and peering cautiously out, anxious to discover the lurking-place of the ambushed assassin.

"Oh, mine gootness! are you not killed, Mister Blake?" asked Cohen, picking himself up cautiously, and taking particular care to keep out of the range of the doorway.

"No, no, I am worth a dozen dead men, but it was a mighty close call, I tell you, and you can bet high on that, too!" Blake replied.

"I didn't think the night was light enough to enable any one to draw a bead on me, but I never thought of my lighted cigar."

"You see, the fire of my weed showed the rascal exactly where to shoot, and although it was a rifle-shot and fired from a good distance, the fellow came within three inches of making a bull's-eye which would have sealed the fate of yours truly."

"For der love of gootness, Mister Blake, close up der door before der rascal fires mit der guns again."

"Oh, don't be alarmed, the picnic is over for to-night," the other rejoined.

"The fellow is too shrewd to wait for a moment after firing his shot, because there's a chance, of course, that the aim was not correct, and he will hesitate to give me a chance to get at him."

"I thought I might be able to see him taking to his heels, but the night is too dark. If it had not been for the lighted cigar he would not have been able to get a chance at me."

"For gootness sake, Mr. Blake, don't ever smoke mit a cigar in der doorway again!" the Hebrew exclaimed, still nervous with fear.

"Don't you worry about that," Blake rejoined.

"There's an old saying which I always believe in living up to, and it is, 'once caught, twiceshy.' But I tell you what it is, partner, I'll have a nice dummy fixed up to-morrow, and hereafter every night that dummy will smoke a cigar right in this doorway every evening, just as a bait to catch this fellow who is so handy with his rifle."

"How can der dummy catch der scamp?" Cohen asked, in wonder.

"Well, the dummy will not catch him, but it will lure him on to get another shot, and I'll find some hiding-place out yonder, and after this pilgrim plugs the dummy and starts to retreat, I'll be on him like a thousand of bricks, and I give you my word, I'll whale him in a way that he will despise."

"Mine gootness! he should be killed, Mis'er Blake!" cried Cohen, earnestly.

"Well, after I get through with him, I reckon he will feel just about as if he would as lief die as live," the Fresh of Frisco replied, grimly.

Then he closed the door and soon the partners retired for the night.

And now let us avail ourselves of the author's privilege, and follow the footsteps of the assassin.

He had been concealed behind a little knoll of ground a good five hundred feet from the back door of the store.

And this was the third night that the assassin had lain in ambush, waiting for a chance to get a shot at the man whose life he sought.

On the two previous occasions Blake had sat back out of range, and though the spy had shifted his position a half-a-dozen times, yet he had not been able to draw such a bead on the Californian as he thought would surely result in destroying his life.

The scoundrel was as patient as a red-skin about the matter, and had made up his mind not to risk a shot until he was certain that it would accomplish the result at which he aimed.

On this occasion the lighted tip of Blake's cigar afforded him an excellent guide for his shot.

And he discharged his rifle only after taking a most careful aim.

Pure accident alone had defeated the purpose of the assassin and saved the life of the Fresh of Frisco.

Just at the moment that the shot was fired, Blake, who sat with his chair tilted back on its hind legs against the door, moved slightly in order to get in a more comfortable position, and this change of position was all that saved him from instant death by the bullet of the assassin, for if he had not moved the ball would have gone directly through his head.

And after firing the shot, without waiting to discover whether his design had succeeded or miscarried, the assassin rose to his feet and fled, running at a good rate of speed, but taking care that his footfalls should be as noiseless as possible.

He was shod with Indian moccasins, on purpose, it would seem, to be able to move almost noiselessly over the earth.

For fully five minutes he hurried on before relaxing his speed in the least; then, satisfied that he was safe from pursuit, he slackened his pace and finally came to a walk.

"Now, then, if I've settled his hash it's wot I call a good night's work!" he exclaimed. "And I reckon the chances are jest about a hundred to one that I've done the trick, and no one the wiser for it either."

"To-morrow, in Santa Fé, when they ask who killed the Fresh of Frisco, nary soul thar will be able to answer the question."

The man went on, his rifle carried in the hollow of his arm, chuckling in glee at the success of his murderous attack, for in his mind there was not the least doubt that his bullet had sapped the life of the Californian.

The noise produced by Cohen when he had flung himself over backward in his chair, in his wild alarm at the shot, had reached the ears of the assassin and he supposed it was the fall of Blake, writhing in the agonies of death, that he heard.

And so, perfectly satisfied that he had accomplished the murderous task which he had undertaken, he went gleefully on his way.

The night was one of those peculiar ones, not dark, nor yet light, but now, as the moon was slowly rising above the horizon, it was gradually becoming lighter.

The assassin, feeling that he was now safe from all pursuit, was proceeding carelessly onward, without taking the least care to hide the noise of his footsteps, although, shod as he was in the soft Indian footgear, his steps were almost noiseless.

Not anticipating any pursuit, he was not on the watch to discover if he was followed.

Soon he entered into a rather rough and broken bit of country.

The same section, by the way, where the encounter between the Fresh of Frisco and the Sharpshooter had taken place, as detailed in one of the earlier chapters of our story, as the patient reader will perhaps remember.

And as the assassin marched along, with his mind full of satisfaction, there came a sound to his ears which caused him to start and then come to a sudden halt.

The noise was like what would be produced by some one following cautiously in his rear and stepping by accident upon a dry twig, which had snapped under the pressure.

For a moment the heart of the fellow fairly seemed to stand still, and his breath came thick and hard.

"Pshaw! I am a fool!" he murmured, after waiting for a few moments, eagerly listening, but unable to hear a sound.

"My ears must have deceived me, or if they did not it was some little lizard scampering amid the rocks."

He resumed his onward way, not carelessly as before but with great caution.

Despite his efforts to convince himself that the noise which he had heard did not amount to anything, he was both worried and alarmed.

Not ten steps had he gone when he fancied he heard a slight sound to his right and a little in advance of him as though some one was cautiously stealing along with intent to surprise him.

Again he halted, his heart beating wildly and his face white with fear, for there was something so mysterious about this matter that it seemed to appall him.

He removed the rifle from its place in the hollow of his arm and raised the hammer so as to be ready for action.

"Man or devil, whatever you are, come out and show yourself! I'm not afraid of you!" he cried, vauntingly, but his face gave the lie to the assertion.

There wasn't any answer to the challenge and not a sound could he hear, and yet there was some subtle instinct in the assassin's nature which told him that a foe was on his track.

A dangerous one, too, to be able to approach him in such a stealthy manner.

Who was it?

Not Blake, for he believed he had left the Fresh of Frisco weltering in his blood.

Who else though would pursue him?

It was getting lighter and lighter each moment, but the rocky fastness afforded plenty of chance for concealment.

A good five minutes the assassin waited and then again went on, but not twenty paces had he taken when the secret tracker stepped from behind a boulder.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

JUSTICE IS DONE.

RIGHT into the trail, barring the way, stepped the new-comer.

A cry of rage escaped from the lips of the assassin, for on the instant he recognized the secret foe and realized that he need not expect any mercy.

The villain was the bully whom the Fresh of Frisco had been compelled to handle so roughly on the night when he had made his appearance in Santa Fé, the notorious Laff Pick, and the tracker was the Indian girl, Lute Winnemucca.

Like the faithful dog she had hovered near to Blake in order to be able to watch over him, and though she had not discovered the concealed ruffian in time to prevent him from firing the shot designed to take the life of Blake, yet, after the attempt was made, she easily got upon his track and followed him up, determined upon vengeance.

The moment that the savage maid stepped from behind the rock, which she had managed to gain by circling around the ruffian when he had come to a halt for the purpose of listening, he leveled his rifle.

But before he could discharge the piece, she fired, and the report from his own weapon seemed like the echo from hers.

Her shot struck him full in the chest, so staggering him, that the muzzle of his rifle was tilted upward, and his bullet went clear over the head of the girl and spent itself in the air.

The rifle dropped from his hands and he sunk all in a heap to the ground.

The girl approached, dropped the butt of her gun to the earth and stood, leaning upon the muzzle, surveying the writhings of the wounded ruffian, without a single touch of pity.

"Oh, you murdering red-skin, you have done for me, you she-devil," he gasped.

"If I have, it is a mercy to you," she replied, contemptuously.

"How do you make that out?" he groaned.

"Is it not better to die by my bullet than by the rope of the hangman, which, if I had not taken upon myself to play the executioner would surely have been your fate some day?"

"Curse you! I would be willing to risk it."

"You ought to die; such a wretch as you are is not fit to live!" the girl cried.

"You have no right to kill me—you will be hanged for this when it is discovered," the wounded man declared, writhing with pain.

"When it is discovered!" she exclaimed in contempt.

"And how soon do you think that will be? Who will discover it too?"

"Do you think I will be fool enough to walk into Santa Fé and say I am the one who shot Laff Pick; what are you going to do about it?"

"Oh, no, I am no such idiot as that!"

"It is some hours yet to morning and when the light comes, there will not be much left of you."

"You are in the country of the coyotes; they roam through this region in large numbers, and when the wolves once discover you they will have a rare feast."

"Your bones may be found, but that is all that will be left of you after the coyotes have finished their meal."

The wounded ruffian groaned aloud in mortal agony.

"Oh, for the love of Heaven do not leave me here to be eaten by the coyotes!" he implored.

"And why should I not?" she asked with true savage sternness.

"You are a woman—you will not be so cruel!"

"Oh, yes, I am a woman, but you did not think of that when you tried to hound me to death that night in the plaza of Santa Fé!"

"If it had not been for this stranger, whom you tried to assassinate to-night, you would have succeeded in your purpose and I would have been sacrificed without mercy."

"But now when you have been stricken down in a fair fight, you plead like a coward for your life!"

"I am not fit to die—give me some time to prepare for the other world," he begged.

"I am not sure that my wound is mortal; if I have help I may be able to get over it."

"You are skillful at dressing all sorts of wounds; in heaven's name then take pity upon me, and try to save my life."

"I have been a bad man, I know, but I will repent; I will turn over a new leaf and lead a better life in the future, only save me now."

She looked at the pleading man with a contemptuous expression upon her face.

Education had not tamed her savage instincts.

"You tried to kill this stranger, you had no mercy upon him; you tried to kill me just now, and if your bullet had struck home and mine had missed, what mercy would you have shown me?"

"Bah! you would have left me here to die like a wounded dog."

"Do you think I don't know you?"

The girl turned upon her heel as if to depart. In anguish the wounded ruffian tried one last appeal.

"Winnemucca, for the love of heaven don't go away and leave me to the mercy of the wolves!" he cried.

"I can be of service to you—I'll reform and be a good man—I will betray the Bloodsuckers, so you can exterminate the whole band."

The girl turned eagerly.

"Aha, you are one of the Bloodsuckers then?"

"Yes, I have been a member of the band ever since it started. That's only three of us who are in it. The rest we pick up hyer and thar to do the jobs arter we plan them, and that is the reason why no one has ever got onto us."

"But I'll give up the hull thing now if you'll try and save me. It was the chief of the Bloodsuckers who put up this job to kill Blake to-night."

"Was it?" asked the girl, and an angry frown gathered upon her dark face.

"Yes, of course; I don't know whether I killed him or not, but I reckon I did, for I had a mighty fine bead drawn on him, and I am about as good a rifle shot as you kin scare up in this town; but, as I was going to say, if I have wiped him out the Bloodsucker chief is more to blame than I am, 'cos he hired me to do it, and I am to git a cool thousand dollars for the job."

"Blake is not dead," said the girl, abruptly.

"You don't say so!" exclaimed the other, doubtfully. "Well, it is mighty strange, that's all I've got to say, for I had a dead-sure bead drawn on him, and I thought I heard him fall arter I fired."

"It was the Jew who fell backward in his chair. I saw Blake spring to his feet and get out of the doorway."

"Well, he couldn't do that if he had my bullet in his brain."

"You miserable wretch, do you think I would have permitted you to live all this time if you had slain him?" the Indian girl exclaimed.

"No! I would have trampled the life out of you with as little feeling as though you were a wounded snake!"

A quick shudder ran through the frame of the outlaw, as he listened to her fierce words, for he knew that she meant everything she said.

"Well, I'm glad I missed him, and if you'll let up on me and help me out of this scrape this time, I'll make a clean breast of it and put you in the way of fixing it so that Blake will be able to get the best of the Bloodsuckers."

The girl seemed undecided; evidently she was wavering, and the ruffian gained courage.

"It stands to reason that he will not be always able to parry these blows struck at him in the dark, and if it goes on, some time luck will go against him, and then he'll go under."

The girl nodded. The statement seemed true enough.

"Now help me, and I can fix it so that he can get the best of his enemies."

"This Bloodsucker chief is the fellow who has been making all the trouble."

"He has determined to either drive Blake from the town or kill him, and if he keeps on the chances are that he will succeed in doing the latter."

The girl fixed a searching gaze upon him.

"Are you speaking the truth? Can you really give me information that will be of value, or

are you uttering falsehoods for the sake of saving your miserable life?" she demanded, evidently distrusting the outlaw.

"I haven't told you anything but the truth, as I'm a sinner!" he declared, earnestly.

"Very well; I will assume that you have spoken the truth and do what I can to aid you."

"And I will do all in my power to pay you for it."

"I don't suppose you will believe me, but I tell you I am a changed man."

"I've got all I want of this kind of a life, and I don't intend to have any more of it."

"I had the closest call for my life this time that I ever had, and if I only succeed in pulling through, I give you my word I'll be an altered man in the future."

"I hope so," the girl said, simply.

Then she examined and bandaged his wound.

It was a severe one, but to her thinking not a mortal hurt.

Her cave in the hillside was near at hand, and to it she assisted the wounded man. When he was comfortably bestowed therein, to her he confided the secret of the outlaw band known as the Bloodsuckers.

The tale was soon told, and when it was ended the girl exclaimed:

"One and all shall die, if not by my rifle then by the hand of Judge Lynch!"

"There will be no peace in Santa Fé until they are destroyed," the wounded man declared.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A SURPRISE.

IN three days from the time that the arrangement was made Old Bullion's daughter was ready to set out on her trip to the East.

She took the stage-coach—there wasn't any railroads anywhere near Santa Fé at the time of which we write—and the alcalde went with her to keep her company for the first fifty miles of the journey.

As it happened Old Bullion and his daughter were the only passengers in the coach that morning, and the alcalde remarked he was glad he had made up his mind to come, for she would have been apt to be lonesome all alone in the coach.

The journey was destined to be an eventful one, for, before they had gone twenty miles from the town the stage came to a sudden halt.

The alcalde looked out of the window for the purpose of ascertaining what was the matter and was amazed to find that they were surrounded by road-agents.

There was one ahead, one behind and one on each side, all armed with rifles, mounted on good horses, and each and every man wearing the quaint disguises peculiar to the outlaws who called themselves the Bloodsuckers.

Old Bullion produced his revolvers immediately, for to give battle to the death to these marauders was his first impulse.

The driver had happened to bend over from his box on the same side of the coach through the window of which the alcalde had poked his head.

"Tommy, we must fight the scoundrels!" Old Bullion cried.

"Oh, thunder, alcalde, thar ain't the least bit of use for to try that game!" the driver replied.

"Don't you see that they have got repeating-rifles and they will jest riddle the coach until it is as full of holes as a sieve."

"That is so, but I hate to give in to the scoundrels!"

"Yes, that's true; but the boys must live some way, and when a man gets down on his back what else can he do but go out and 'hold up' a stage."

"It's no use to talk, alcalde, they have got the deadwood on us, and you might as well take things easy."

"Well, I s'pose so," Old Bullion remarked, doubtfully, for his blood was up and he did not feel like giving up his valuables without a struggle.

As it happened though he was not so well heeled, financially, as was generally the case.

It was his habit to lock his big roll of bills and his diamonds up in the safe, which stood in his bedroom, every night upon retiring to rest.

And as he had risen in somewhat of a hurry this morning he had not taken the trouble to unlock the safe.

It was a lucky oversight as it happened.

"If the road-agents have made a special trip this morning to get away with my plunder they will be terribly disappointed," he remarked.

As it happened all the money he had about him was a handful of small bills which he had chanced on the previous day to stuff into one of his pockets.

"Oh, we can't fight," continued the driver, "not with your darter aboard, nohow."

"That's true. Well, Belle," he said, addressing her, "here's an adventure for you, right in the beginning of your journey."

"Well, I can't say that I admire it, father, but I suppose there's no help for it."

"None at all; we must pay toll before these persuasive gentlemen will allow us to proceed."

The man in front of the stage seemed to be the leader of the road-agent band for it was he who first made his appearance in the trail and, with leveled rifle, signaled to the driver to come to a halt.

Now with rifle menacingly flourished he rode up to the stage-coach.

"Well, driver, what is it to be, a fight or a surrender?" he queried in a harsh voice, evidently disguised.

"Nary fight," responded the knight of the reins and whip.

"That is whar your heads are level. Who have you got inside the hearse?"

"Old Bullion and his darter."

"Glad to hear it; we're flat broke, the hull gang of us, and we are jest dying to strike somebody who is able to put up a good stake to start us a-going again."

At this point the alcalde stuck his head out of the window again.

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that, stranger, for I'm afraid that you are doomed to be a leetle disappointed this time."

"As a general thing I travel pretty well heeled and can be depended upon to cut up tolerably rich."

"But I came away from home in a hurry this morning and didn't go for my cash, so, boys, if I can out an even fifty you'll be lucky."

"Oho, ho!" laughed the outlaw leader, hoarsely, as he approached the window through which the head of the alcalde was poked.

"That's too thin a story; that will not go down with us. We know you, Martin Marmaduke, as well as you know yourself, and if you think you can play any gum game on us, you have made a mighty big mistake in your reckoning, that's all!"

The alcalde became red in the face; it was many a long year since he had been addressed in this fashion and it was not pleasant.

"I am not trying to play any gum game!" he declared.

"On the contrary I am giving it to you as straight as a string. Of course if you do not choose to believe me, I cannot help that. It is the truth that I am telling you and there is no two ways about it."

"Too thin—too thin!" declared the outlaw chief, bluntly. "We know that you never travel without your wealth."

"Oh, we are posted, we are. Whar are your sparklers?—whar's the big roll of bills that you always carry in your pocket?"

"Come, old man, shell out, and the quicker the better. We don't want to be disagreeable, but we want your plunder and must have it."

"The fact is we have been laying for you for a month of Sundays, and now that we have got you foul we are not going to be cheated out of the wealth!"

"I give you my word, gentlemen, that you are barking up the wrong tree this time," the alcalde declared, earnestly.

"You are welcome to search me, but you will find that it is as I have told you."

"I have made it a rule to always play a square game, every time, and I am not going to change my policy now, although you have kinder rung in a cold deal on me."

"Oh, no, we know your trick—you can't fool us; we are too old roosters to be caught with chaff!" the bandit cried.

"You have stuffed your wealth in among the cushions, dropped your diamonds in some slit which you have cut in the coach linings, but we will have the plunder out if we have to rip the durned old hearse to pieces."

"So tumble out and give up your we'pons; sorry to disturb you, marm," he continued, ducking his head to Isabelle, "but business, you see, is business, and thar's no help for it."

"Hop out, both of you, and don't you attempt any funny business, you old galoot of an alcalde, or we'll fill you so full of holes that you won't hold water."

"We have got the drop on you, and with us Bloodsuckers it is shoot on sight!"

"I realize my position, gentlemen, and I am not fool enough to attempt to offer resistance when it cannot possibly do me any good," Old Bullion replied, with a great deal of dignity, and then he got out of the coach and assisted his daughter to descend.

At a signal from the outlaw chief the rest of the band hastened to the spot.

And now that he had time to survey the road-agents, the alcalde noted, from the dusky hands, that two of the four were either redskins or else masquerading as Indians.

Brief time had he for reflection, though, for the moment the men came up the outlaw chief instructed one of them to receive the alcalde's weapons.

And after this ceremony was performed, the road-agent leader said:

"Now, alcalde, we'll have to go through you, and your gal had better get out of the way."

"A couple of you escort the lady over yonder," this was addressed to the outlaws.

The two dusky-banded fellows, whom Old Bullion had taken to be Indians, moved forward.

One of them was dismounted, for he was the man who had received the alcalde's weapons,

and placing himself by Isabelle's side he nodded toward the hillside.

The girl cast an anxious look at her father.

"Go with the men, don't fear, they will not harm you," the alcalde said, outwardly calm, yet with a burning fever within, for he longed to take the rascals by the throat.

The girl departed with the dusky-hued scoundrels, and took up a position about a hundred yards away.

Then Old Bullion was searched in the most thorough manner, but beyond the forty odd dollars which he had in his pocket, as he had informed the outlaws, nothing of value came to light.

Then the coach was ransacked, but as the alcalde had told the truth about his valuables nothing whatever was discovered.

The road-agent chief was terribly enraged.

"You have tricked us, you old scoundrel!" he cried. "But you are not out of the wood yet!"

Then he made a signal to the men who had the girl in charge.

In a twinkling she was grasped by the man on the ground, lifted to the embrace of the brawny savage on the horse, then the other sprung into the saddle and away they went, without paying the least attention to the wild screams of the hapless girl thus rudely abducted.

"When you want your gal, alcalde, come with twenty thousand dollars alone to where Mud Creek runs into the Rio Grande and you'll find a man there prepared to talk business with you!" cried the chief of the Bloodsuckers, and then he put spurs to his horse, and followed by his companion, dashed away.

The old man, in his rage and despair, ran a few steps after them as though he thought he could pursue them on foot, and then, realizing the folly of such a course, halted.

In a few moments the outlaws with their beautiful captive disappeared amid the foothills.

"Jump into the coach, alcalde!" cried the driver; "I'll make Santa Fé in quick time and you kin raise a gang to corral these scoundrels!"

The advice was good, and Old Bullion adopted it.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SANTA FÉ DELIBERATES.

THE driver was as good as his word, and the coach went back to Santa Fé on the jump.

The moment the coach made its appearance in the streets of the ancient city, all who saw it understood that something was wrong, and by the time it got to the plaza and halted, there was quite a little crowd gathered.

The driver explained the situation in a few words, excited almost beyond measure when he thought of the daring outrage that had been perpetrated.

"We have been stopped by that infernal gang of Bloodsuckers; they went through the alcalde, and have carried off his gal!"

The citizens stared at each other as they listened to this startling announcement, as strange as any that the streets of the ancient city had heard in spite of its years.

By this time Old Bullion had descended from the coach.

During the few hours he had aged fearfully; he seemed fully ten years older than the man who had left Santa Fé that morning.

A dozen voices were raised in sympathetic cries.

"It's an awful blow, gentlemen," he said, "and I don't really know what is to be done."

"Call a public meeting, alcalde," suggested Jimsonweed, who happened to be in the crowd, "call a public meeting, and give us all a chance to chip in and help you out."

"Thar ain't a man in the town that will hold back, and I'm betting all I'm worth in the world on it!"

"The wretches have abducted my child for the purpose of extorting a ransom from me," Old Bullion explained.

"The chief said that if I wished to get her back again I must come alone to where Mud Creek empties into the Rio Grande, and bring twenty thousand dollars with me."

"Twenty thousand devils," yelled Jimsonweed, in a great rage. "We'll give them twenty thousand ropes to put around their 'tarnel necks, though I reckon if we git our hands upon them one hempen neck-tie apiece will be enough to settle their hash."

The crowd vociferously echoed this sentiment. And it was settled that a meeting was to be held in the plaza in half an hour to discuss what was best to be done.

Old Bullion took his way sadly to his office, after being detained some ten minutes by anxious sympathizers on the way.

In the office he found Santilla, the chief of police, tranquilly smoking a cigarette.

The moment the alcalde entered he noted the strangeness of his looks, and anxiously inquired the cause.

Great was the indignation of the chief of police when he learned of the outrage which had occurred.

"Twenty thousand dollars!" he exclaimed, in conclusion.

"No, no, we know a game worth two of that."

"Instead of spending twenty thousand to rescue the girl, I would, if I were you, gladly spend fifty thousand to rescue Isabelle and punish these villains who have dared to commit so bold a crime."

"My own idea exactly!" Old Bullion replied, and then he told Santilla of the meeting which was to be held in the plaza to deliberate in regard to the matter.

"A capital idea!" the chief of police exclaimed. "We can raise a half-a-dozen scouting parties and can search the country so thoroughly, that if the scoundrels have a nest anywhere within a hundred miles of Santa Fé, we cannot fail to find them."

After a few more words of not enough importance to be worth detailing the two made their way to the square.

About all the people of Santa Fé and its environs had assembled in the square.

A rude platform had been erected about large enough to contain a dozen people.

Jimsonweed, who was generally elected to preside over anything of this kind—all Santa Fé recognizing his abilities as an executive officer—having been duly chosen by the crowd as chairman to preside over the meeting, had organized a *posse* to prevent the impatient, ignorant fellows, who knew no better, from intruding on the platform, and when the alcalde and captain of police arrived they were at once escorted to seats upon the elevation, where were already gathered eight of the principal citizens of the town.

When the alcalde and the captain of police came upon the platform there were just three empty chairs left. Old Bullion and Santilla took two of them, and then the eagle eye of Jimsonweed caught sight of the Fresh of Frisco standing in the front ranks of the crowd near to the stand.

"Come right up this way, Mister Blake!" the saloon-keeper exclaimed.

"We need jist sich men as you are when we git into a leetle fix of this kind!"

"Come up and gi'n us a lift!"

"Thank you, but I had rather be excused from occupying so conspicuous a place," Blake replied.

"I'm a new-comer in the town, and there's a heap of men here better fitted to step forward and suggest how the thing ought to be run than I."

"But I'm with you though to put her through, whatever is decided to be done, to the last dollar and the last gasp!"

There was a cheer at this.

The chief of police looked darkly at his ancient foe, but the alcalde thanked him with a courtly bow.

"Thar ain't no use of talkin', Mister Fresh of Frisco, but you've got fur to git onto that yere stand!" cried a stalwart fellow, right in Blake's ear, and the surrounding crowd agreeing with the speaker in this opinion, gently forced the Californian forward until he was really obliged to accept the seat reserved for him by Jimsonweed.

It will be merely a waste of time and of the reader's patience to relate the details of the deliberation.

Suffice it to say, it was the sense of the meeting that before agreeing to pay any ransom for the return of the girl, all possible efforts should be made to track the abductors and recover her by force.

And so four parties were formed to take the trail and endeavor to make it hot for the Bloodsuckers.

One was commanded by the alcalde, another by the captain of police, the third by Spanish John, and the fourth by the Fresh of Frisco.

Blake tried to get out of the command, saying it was so long since he had done any scouting that he was afraid that he had forgotten all he knew about it.

But the crowd wouldn't take no for an answer, and so Blake consented to take the command, provided that Jimsonweed went along.

The saloon-keeper readily agreed to this, although, as he said, he could "juggle a tumbler or fry an egg" far better than he could strike a trail.

It was arranged that all four parties should proceed in one body to the spot where the stage-coach was stopped by the road-agents, and then try to follow the trail made by the marauders when they rode off through the foothills with the girl.

Of course, as the reader knows who has followed the fortunes of Jackson Blake, the Fresh of Frisco, since the day when we first introduced him to notice, no better Indian tracker or plainsman existed than our hero, but for reasons of his own he did not allow the fact to become known on this occasion, but kept modestly in the background, allowing the others to do the talking.

The party reached the spot where the attack had been made and then the men who professed to be scouts and Indian-fighters were sent out in advance to follow the trail.

A couple of these men were what they professed to be, but the others were a lot of ignorant

boasters, who merely got in the way of, and impeded, the experienced plainmen.

The trail was so broad and distinct, though, that even an inexperienced eye could follow it, but when it bent round and entered the Rio Grande it was hopelessly lost.

Where it entered the river could be plainly distinguished but where it came out no man could tell.

The abductors had resorted to the old device of using the water to "blind the trail."

Then the scouting-parties separated, each one hoping to hit upon the track.

One by one, about sundown, they came straggling into Santa Fe, completely fagged out, and all made the same report.

No trace could be discovered.

The alcalde did not despair; if he could not beat the scoundrels he could yield, and twenty thousand dollars, a mere nothing to him, would ransom his daughter.

This was Santilla's advice.

"Better pay the money, for the scoundrels may do your daughter some harm."

And the counsel, under the circumstances, seemed to be good.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

DEBATING THE MATTER.

OLD BULLION reflected over the matter for a few moments after the chief of police spoke.

"It is true that I can spare twenty thousand dollars well enough," he remarked at last. "Thank Heaven, I am rich enough to give the money and, great as the sum is, I don't think I would miss it. Yet, I must admit it goes sorely against my grain to allow these scoundrels to fleece me."

"It is not pleasant."

"Pleasant!" Old Bullion cried. "No, it is anything but pleasant—the confounded scoundrels!"

"You are right. No doubt this gang is composed of the worst gang of rascals this territory has ever known."

"I would sooner give forty thousand dollars to put a rope around their necks," the alcalde declared, decisively; "but from the way things are going there seems to be small chance of catching the scoundrels."

"That is true. In spite of all our search we were not able to get a clew."

"They are a cunning lot of ruffians and no mistake!" Old Bullion declared. "For if they were not they never would have been able to cover their tracks so as to baffle all efforts to trail them."

"And we had the assistance of some of the smartest trackers in the town, too," Santilla observed—"men who can pick up a trail as well as any of the red-skins."

"Yes, and that goes to show that these scoundrels are extra smart ones, just as I said."

"Well, although it is sorely against my will I suppose I will have to fork over the twenty thousand dollars," the alcalde continued.

"It is a big sum of money to pay."

"Yes, that is so, and I wouldn't yield a dollar of it if I saw any way to get out of the scrape, but these fellows have got me foul and as they are desperate villains there is not much doubt that if I declined to pay they would harm my child."

"Of course you would rather pay twice twenty thousand dollars than have evil come to her," the chief of police observed.

"Oh, that goes without saying!" the father declared.

"These rascals have played an exceedingly shrewd game," Santilla observed in a reflective way. "And it shows that the man who is at the head of the party must possess some brains."

"Yes, yes, the rascal is an uncommonly able one. No doubt about that!" the alcalde declared with a decided shake of his lion-like head.

"How would this strange sharp—this Jackson Blake fill the bill?" Santilla asked with an evil look on his dark face.

The alcalde appeared amazed.

"Oh, no!" he exclaimed, after a moment's pause. "I do not think that can be possible."

"It is but a guess on my part of course, for I have no proof to back it up," the chief of police responded slowly.

"Well, to my thinking, there isn't any probability in the supposition."

"There is no doubt that the sport has brains enough to conceive such a plan, and he possesses courage enough to carry it out, too, although, to tell the truth, there was not much pluck required, for the attack was planned in such a way that it was not possible to offer any resistance."

"Yes, that is so," the chief of police admitted.

"Well, I will explain how the thought came to me. I knew that this sport is a desperate fellow, and one who would not be apt to have any scruples in regard to engaging in a game of this kind—"

"Oh, come, come!" Old Bullion exclaimed. "I really think that you are going a little too far when you make a statement of that kind. I know the fellow is a desperate rascal enough—he has given ample proof of that since he has taken up his quarters in Santa Fe, but I don't

believe he would try any trick of this kind, for, most certainly, he has been square and above board in all his dealings, as far as anybody knows, since coming to the town."

"Yes, yes, I am well aware of that fact, and that he has gone into business, too, with Cohen, and, apparently, settled down into a respectable, steady-going citizen, but this may be a blind so as to divert suspicion from him."

"It may be so, of course, but it is my opinion that it is not at all probable," Old Bullion declared.

"Yes, I understand that on the surface everything looks to be all right, but for all that my suspicions have been aroused," the chief of police persisted.

"But does not that arise from the fact that you don't like the man?" the alcalde asked, shrewdly.

"Oh, no!" the other hastened to declare.

"Well, I didn't know; you would be apt to be prejudiced against him, of course."

"Ah, yes, but in a matter of this kind I should not let my feelings interfere with my judgment!" the chief of police affirmed, with a deal of dignity.

"Of course, but it is human nature to let a thing of that kind have influence, you know," Old Bullion urged.

"Yes, I am aware of that, but I can assure you, alcalde, that I always try to rise superior to any such feeling," the official urged.

"Oh, I do not doubt that—I do not question but that you try to be fair and examine the matter with unprejudiced eyes, but it is sometimes a mighty hard matter for a man to act in that way, no matter how hard he tries."

"That is true, but in this case I think I can do full justice to the man," the chief of police declared.

"And now, alcalde, I will explain to you how it was that my suspicions have been aroused, and I think that after I get through you will admit I have some grounds to go upon," Santilla continued.

"Fire away!" Old Bullion exclaimed. "It is my belief, you know, that you are barking up the wrong tree; still, as this is a mighty uncertain world you may be right and I may be wrong; who knows? as the Mexicans say."

"My attention was first directed to the sport by the peculiar way in which he acted when the meeting took place in the Plaza. As a rule he is always prompt enough in coming forward—always disposed, you know, to make himself prominent, and yet on that occasion he hung back and did not seem at all inclined to take a prominent part."

"Yes, that is true," Old Bullion remarked, thoughtfully. "You have not made any mistake in regard to that matter. But the excuse that the man gave seemed to me to be a reasonable one; he was a stranger in Santa Fe and preferred to remain in the background, allowing older citizens to take the lead."

"But he is not the kind of man to remain in the ranks," the chief of police observed, strewdly. "He is one of the fellows who wants to be a leader."

"Well, I suppose that is correct, but he did not push himself forward in this case," the alcalde admitted.

"Exactly! and that is what excited my suspicions!" Santilla declared. "And it is my belief that he had some strong motive for not desiring to take an active part. Now if you recall the particulars of the search you will remember that when we were baffled, and almost everybody had some suggestion to offer, he was silent."

"Yes, but when he was appealed to he responded by saying that the thing was out of his line, and when there were so many more experienced men than himself present, he felt backward about coming forward."

"Ah, but that struck me as being merely an excuse so as to avoid taking an active part in the matter," the chief of police urged.

"You must admit that if he had had a hand in the affair, he would be apt to act in such a way," Santilla continued.

"Oh, no, I do not agree with you there at all!" the alcalde declared. "My experience is that a man placed in such a position would be mighty apt to take as active a part as possible, so as to avert suspicion from himself, you know, acting on the same principle as the running rascal who cried, 'Stop thief!' at the top of his voice so as to mislead his pursuers."

"Well, all men don't act alike under the same circumstances," Santilla urged.

"That is so. Of course it may be that this sport had a hand in this affair, but I am not inclined to believe it, and this fact that you bring forward, that he was not particularly active in the pursuit, and which gives you the idea that he had something to do with the assault, doesn't impress me that way at all."

"He must have had some reason for acting so contrary to his usual custom," the chief of police argued.

"Oh, I don't doubt that, for he is a man with a big head on his shoulders, but I don't reckon that he held back because he had anything to do with the affair, and thought there was danger of his pards being caught."

"If he was not actuated by some reason of the kind, what was his motive?"

"Ah, now you have got me!" Old Bullion declared.

"I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet," he continued. "And a poorer hand at guessing riddles you will not find on top of this hyer footstool."

"I am not good at guessing myself, yet I think I have solved this puzzle."

"I'll tell you how we stand a chance to settle the matter?" the alcalde declared, abruptly.

"Explain!"

"We will have this sport in and put the question right to him!"

The chief of police stared at Old Bullion for a moment in surprise, just as if he doubted that he was in earnest, and the alcalde, understanding the meaning of the look, cried out:

"Oh, I mean it—every word!"

"Ah, but he will not acknowledge the fact if he is guilty!" Santilla declared.

"Yes, but if we are sharp we ought to be able to pick up some information!" Old Bullion replied.

"Go hunt the cuss up, run him in, and we will put him through a regular cross-examination!"

CHAPTER XL.

A CROSS-EXAMINATION.

THE chief of police rose slowly to his feet, and it was plain from the expression on his face that he did not think in a favorable way of the scheme which the alcalde had suggested.

"Well, I will do as you request, of course," he said. "But I do not really believe you will get anything out of the fellow."

"It will not do any harm to make the trial," Old Bullion replied.

"I think I am a pretty good judge of men," he continued. "And it is my belief that if the sport is mixed up in this affair I shall be able to tell by the way he talks."

"Perhaps you will," Santilla remarked in an extremely doubtful way, and the expression on his face plainly showed that he did not believe that anything could be accomplished.

The alcalde chuckled in his ponderous way after the chief of police departed, for a few moments, and then he said:

"He doesn't take any stock in my idea, and I don't take the least bit in his notion, so we are even as far as that goes."

"I have not the best opinion in the world of this Sharp, but I do not believe he would try any road-agent game of this kind," he continued.

"In the first place he has fallen in love with my Isabelle, or thinks it would be a good speculation to marry the daughter of a man who is as rich as I am, it is about the same thing, and he would not be likely to try any game of this kind unless indeed he had come to the conclusion that he did not stand any chance to get the girl, and so resolved to try and see if he couldn't make a raise by means of an underhand game."

Old Bullion reflected upon this idea for a few moments—it had not occurred to him before—and then he shook his head.

"No, no!" he exclaimed. "I do not believe the Sharp would do anything of the kind."

"He is rash, hot-headed and desperate—one of the men who does not know the meaning of the word fear, and would as soon fight as eat, but when I say that, I believe I have said all that can be said against the man."

"It is my opinion that there isn't anything mean or low about the fellow, and I cannot believe he would stoop to commit a crime of this sort."

"I am anxious though to learn why he did not take a more active part in the pursuit, for as Santilla justly observes he is not the kind of man who is usually content to remain in the background when there is anything going on."

"Possibly though in summoning him here, I shall only have my labor for my pains for he may not be willing to give an explanation," Old Bullion said in conclusion.

The chief of police departed in a decidedly dissatisfied state of mind.

"What a crazy notion!" he exclaimed after he had reached the street. "The old man is surely out of his senses to imagine that he can gain any information from this sport."

"But he is bull-headed, and I have learned from experience that it isn't of any use to attempt to argue with him when he gets an idea in his head."

"All that can be done in such a case is to allow him to go ahead in his own way."

"One consolation, though, is that if the interview is not productive of good, it can hardly result in harm."

Santilla proceeded to the Forty Rod Saloon, and there, as he expected, he found the sport, who surveyed the chief of police with inquiring eyes when the message was delivered to him.

"The alcalde wishes to see me?" he asked, evidently surprised.

"Yes, he is waiting for you in his office."

"All right; it will give me great pleasure to wait upon him."

"You kin jest bet yer bottom dollar that his royal nibs wants yer advice 'bout this hyer business!" Jimsonweed declared.

"He knows that you wasn't behind the door when brains were given out, and I s'pose he reckons that you kin 'savey' 'bout this hyer affair as well as any man w'ot kin be scared up!"

"Jimsonweed, your one great fault is that you are inclined to slop over!" the sport exclaimed, with a grave shake of the head.

"Nary slop!" the saloon-keeper responded, emphatically. "I am a-shootin' right straight at the mark, every time!"

"You are a man who kin be depended upon when thar is a tangle 'round w'ot wants to be straightened out!"

"I know what I am talkin' 'bout, and I stand ready to put up my ducats on you, you bet! and don't you forget it!"

"Your confidence, my noble Jimsonweed, does me honor!" the Fresh declared, with a polite bow.

"But I must rise to remark that I think you are laying it on with a white-wash brush, all the same."

"Nary time!" Jimsonweed replied. "You are the kind of man that it is always safe to tie to, sir; as I said afore, I've got ducats to back up that assertion!"

"I am glad that you have so good an opinion of me," the sport observed, with another bow.

Then he turned to the chief of police, said he was ready to accompany him, and the two departed.

There was no conversation between the two on the way—in fact not much could have been said as it was only a few steps from the saloon to the alcalde's office.

Old Bullion received the sport with a ceremonious bow, and requested him to be seated.

The Fresh took a chair, and the chief of police also seated himself.

"I sent for you, Mr. Blake, in order to get your opinion in regard to this outrage," the alcalde began.

"So far we have not been able to get any clew to the rascals, and it appears as though they have covered up their tracks so completely that it will not be possible to trail them."

"It was a good bit of work," the Fresh remarked. "And from the fact that the job was done so well I should imagine that men who had a great deal of experience in prairie craft planned the affair."

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that," the alcalde assented.

"Under the circumstances of the case if I had had the direction of matters I would have called in some of these red bucks who had the name of being extra skillful at that sort of thing," the Fresh observed.

"It seems to me that you did suggest something of that sort at the meeting on the Plaza," Old Bullion remarked.

"Well, I kind of started in that way but as I saw right at the beginning that the crowd didn't cotton to the thing at all I drew in my horns," Blake explained.

"The idea was that when there were plenty of good white men in the town, who were able to attend to the business, it wasn't of any use to get any of the Indians," Old Bullion replied.

"Oh, I understand all about that, of course, but the trouble is that in all cases of this kind it is a mighty difficult matter to get the right kind of men to take hold of the job," the Fresh said, shrewdly.

"The man who knows his business isn't apt to be the one to push himself forward, but the blunderhead who thinks he knows, when he doesn't, is always sure to come to the front and make a botch of it."

"Well, I believe you are about right," the alcalde responded, in a thoughtful way. "I think myself that some of the men who made the loudest boasts in regard to their abilities in the scouting line, were perfect frauds."

"Oh, yes, not a doubt of it!" the sport declared. "And when those fellows shoved themselves to the front, they disgusted the few good men who might have been able to have done something if they had had a fair show."

"The citizens were very much excited over the matter, naturally, and everybody wanted to take a hand," Old Bullion observed.

"It was a case where the old saying about 'too many cooks spoil the broth' fits in beautifully," the Fresh replied.

"I presume there is a good deal of truth in what you say," the alcalde observed, in grave tones.

And then he continued, abruptly:

"Blake, I am a plain, straight-forward kind of man—one of the sort who does not believe in beating about the bush, and I have sent for you in order to put a few questions."

"Go ahead! I am ready to answer to the best of my ability," the sport responded, apparently not at all affected by the odd manner of the alcalde.

"What I was going to say is that your conduct in this matter has excited my surprise," Old Bullion affirmed.

"How so?"

"You seem to be lukewarm—not to take the interest which you should take."

"Well, it isn't often that anybody can accuse

me of acting in that way," the Fresh replied, thoughtfully.

"There is no doubt, though, that I didn't push myself to the front as I might have done. To use the old joke, I am seldom backward in coming forward, but on this occasion you and the chief here"—and he nodded to Santilla—"seemed to want to run the thing, and then there were four or five loud-mouthed citizens who were crammed so full of knowledge of how the thing ought to be run, that I really reckoned they might burst, if they didn't get a chance to tell what they thought, so I calculated I better lay low."

"But you have made quite a reputation since coming to the town, and if you had spoken your words would surely have been heeded," the alcalde urged.

"I am not so sure about that," Blake answered. "My suggestion in regard to employing some Indian trackers was not well received, and so I thought I had better hold my tongue."

"That was the game, though, and you can bet high on it too," the Fresh continued in his decided way.

"According to all the signs as far as I could see, the red-men had a hand in this affair; you yourself stated that two of the party who attacked the coach were either Indians or white men disguised as red-skins."

"Yes, that is true," the alcalde admitted.

"In my mind there isn't much doubt that they were genuine red-men; all the signs point that way, and these red bucks, experts in all mountain and prairie tricks, went in to blind the trail so that it would not be possible to follow them, and they did the work beautifully too, there isn't any doubt about that, for they fixed the trail so that after it entered the river all trace of it was lost."

"That is an old trick, you know, alcalde, and when it is carefully worked it will baffle the best tracker who ever hit off a trail."

"Yes, I am aware of that fact, although I cannot boast of a great deal of knowledge in that line," Old Bullion remarked.

"Now, my idea would have been to select a few skillful trackers, old mountain men, and get some red bucks who had good reputations as trailers."

"Yes, but you see everybody was anxious to take a hand!" the alcalde exclaimed.

"Exactly, and the less a man knew about this prairie business the more anxious he was to go ahead so as to show the crowd what a great scout he was, and the result was that everybody got in everybody else's way; there was no leadership to the affair; people were racing up and down the river, and if the fellows had left a faint trail behind them, these blunderers not only would not have been able to find it, but they covered the track up by their prancing up and down so that nobody else would be able to get on the trail."

"I was clean disgusted with the way things were going, and that was the reason why I did not come prominently to the front."

"Ah, yes, I see," said Old Bullion, slowly.

"Well, I don't know but what you are right about the matter," the alcalde added, after a pause. "But if you had argued the matter out in this way, right in the beginning, I have no doubt your words would have been listened to, and your counsel might have been followed."

"Oh, no, I don't think there was any chance of that at all!" the sport declared. "I was a stranger in the town, and though I flatter myself I have succeeded in proving that I am able to keep my end up under ordinary circumstances, yet if I had attempted to take the direction of a matter like this, the chances are big that I would have found myself in hot water right away."

"I claim to be a good man, alcalde, but I am not anxious to stack up against a whole town."

"Well, I don't know about that," Old Bullion replied. "From what I have seen of you I should not imagine that it would make much difference to you how many were on the opposite side so long as you took it into your head to interfere in any particular matter."

The Fresh laughed. "I suppose you think you have sized me up pretty well?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I think I have got you down pretty fine," the alcalde remarked in a grim way.

"On the occasion of our first meeting you were facing pretty big odds," he continued. "And I must say that it required considerable sand for a man to stand up against so big a crowd for the sake of an Indian girl."

"Oh, well, that was one of the occasions when a big bluff worked to perfection," the sport replied, in his careless, off-hand way.

"Besides, although there was a heap of people in the crowd, yet they didn't mean business; they were only following a couple of leaders like a flock of sheep, and when I took the starch out of the king-pins the gang were as ready to throw up their hats and yell for me as they had been for the other fellows, so the job was not such a difficult one; but in this case of yours I should have had to set myself up in opposition to all the solid men of the town, and though I may be a reckless dare-devil yet when it comes

to bucking against odds of that kind I would rather be excused."

"Your explanation is a reasonable one," the alcalde remarked. "And I am glad to discover that you were as anxious as anybody to do what you could in this matter."

"Oh, yes, I was ready and willing, but, as I explained, to my notion there were too many of us, and too little system to be able to accomplish anything."

"Well, I don't know but what you are right; under the circumstances though we couldn't very well go ahead in any other way."

"But there isn't any use of discussing the matter now," Old Bullion continued, a little impatiently. "We made a bungle of it—came back no wiser than when we started, and now the question is, what had we best do?"

"Ah, that is a mighty difficult matter to decide," the Fresh replied with a dubious shake of the head.

"As far as I can see there is not the slightest clew by means of which we might be able to track the scoundrels."

"No, it is a blind trail, as these mountain men say."

"Of course, I can recover my daughter by yielding to the demands of the rascals," the alcalde said.

"And pay the twenty thousand dollars, eh?" the sport remarked, shaking his head as though he did not approve of the idea.

"Yes, certainly I should have to pay."

"Mighty rough though to have to do it!" the Fresh declared.

"It is not pleasant," the chief of police observed, for the first time joining in the conversation. "Still, under the circumstances what can be done?"

"I would be the last man in the world to counsel yielding to the scoundrels if I saw any way to get out of it," he continued. "But I must frankly admit that I don't. As you remarked, the scoundrels have left a blind trail and it does not seem possible to follow them. That is your opinion, Mr. Blake, is it not?" And Santilla looked searchingly at the sport as he spoke.

"Well, yes, it really looks that way now," the Fresh replied, slowly.

"But as I said before if the crowd had been kept back and only a few experienced men gone ahead, I think there is a chance that the trail might have been found."

"You can't suggest anything now?" the chief of police asked.

"Oh, no, it is too late," the sport answered. "The search might be kept up, of course, and by accident some clew gained in regard to the road-agents' hiding-place."

"You know these Bloodsuckers, as they call themselves, must have a headquarters somewhere, but it may be miles and miles away for all that anybody knows."

"Your idea is that it would be wise for me to make terms with the fellows and pay the twenty thousand dollars?" the alcalde said.

"Well, I don't really see just now what else you can do," Blake replied.

"Of course you could keep on sending out scouting parties, but I think the chances are big that they would not be able to discover anything."

"And then too there is the danger that if the ruffians get the idea you do not intend to accede to their wishes they may harm your daughter," Santilla urged.

"That is so!" Blake declared. "That is a point which certainly must be considered."

"I would not be willing to have harm come to my girl for twice twenty thousand dollars!" the father declared.

"Certainly not!" the Fresh asserted. "Even if you were a poor man you would gladly give all that you could raise rather than she should suffer, but as it is, you are rich, and even so large a sum as twenty thousand dollars is a mere trifle to you."

"Oh, yes, I can spare it!" the alcalde replied.

"I hate like thunder to yield to the rascals but it is one of those cases where a man must put his pride in his pocket."

"Let me see," said the chief of police in a reflective way. "You were to send word to the point where Mud Creek flows into the big river?"

"Yes; the road-agents will have a man in waiting there, I suppose," the alcalde replied.

"How would it do to pretend to be willing to come to an agreement with them—send a messenger to this point, and at the same time have some trackers in readiness to trail the man who comes on behalf of the rascals? In that way it might be possible to find out just where the band have their headquarters," Santilla suggested.

"Yes, the game might be worked in that way," Old Bullion observed in a thoughtful way. "How does it strike you, Blake?"

"Well, really, I don't want to set my judgment up against the chief here, who ought to be well posted in regard to such matters, but if I was going to run the thing, I wouldn't try any game of the kind."

"What is the objection?" Santilla asked in a surprised way.

"Why, I don't think you are giving the fellows credit for possessing any shrewdness," the

Sharp replied. "And, most certainly, from the way they engineered the stoppage of the coach, it shows that the men know what they are about; it is my belief that they will be on their guard, and if you try any underhand game with them, you will be pretty certain to get the worst of it."

"You would advise a complete surrender, then?" the alcalde asked.

"I don't see what else you can do, under the circumstances," the Fresh replied. "The rascals have got you in a tight place, and when a man gets in a fix of that kind it is my idea that he is wise to get out of it in the easiest and quickest way possible."

"I don't know but what you are right," the alcalde said. "These scoundrels are smart enough, and, undoubtedly, they will be on the watch to see that I don't get the best of them by means of any trick, so I suppose I may as well open communication with them and prepare to fork over the twenty thousand ducats, though I swear it goes awfully against the grain to do it."

"Ah, well, sometimes a man is obliged to do such things," the chief of police remarked, with the true Mexican disposition of accepting the decrees of fate with oriental resignation.

"The chance of fortune has put you in the power of these rascals," he continued. "You pay the money and redeem your daughter: then after she is safe here in Santa Fe again you can take measures to revenge yourself."

"Yes, that is so!" the alcalde exclaimed. "After Isabelle is out of their clutches I can raise a force and proceed to hunt the scoundrels from off the face of the earth!"

"That is the idea!" the Fresh declared. "It is their chance to laugh now, but in time yours may come."

"Yes, yes, you can hunt the scoundrels as though they were a lot of wolves," the chief remarked.

Then the sport said that there was a little private matter which he would like to discuss with the alcalde, and Santilla, taking the hint, withdrew.

Old Bullion was rather astonished for he could not imagine what was coming.

CHAPTER XLI.

BLAKE EXPLAINS.

"You see this is a little thing on which I would like to get your opinion," the sport explained after the chief of police departed.

"What is it?" the alcalde asked, both his face and tone showing his surprise.

"Well, it doesn't amount to much—but the chief left that door open, I reckon!" the Fresh exclaimed, abruptly, and then, rising, he walked to the door.

It was tightly closed, as he knew it was, but he proceeded to open it, and as he did so, the sound of footsteps in hasty retreat could plainly be distinguished.

Blake laughed.

"Do you hear that fellow making off?" he asked.

"Yes; some one was playing the spy upon us," Old Bullion replied.

"Your chief of police is disposed to be curious!" the sport observed with a laugh as he closed the door and resumed his seat.

"You don't mean to say that it was Santilla?" the alcalde cried in amazement.

"Oh, yes! Nobody else! His curiosity was excited by my statement that I wanted to see you in private, and so he reckoned he would like to find out what it was all about, but I am up to all games of that kind, and the man who plays any roots on me will have to get up early in the morning."

"I think you must have made some mistake!" the alcalde declared.

"Oh, no, nary a mistake!" the sport replied, decidedly. "I felt sure he would play the spy and so I determined to satisfy myself. When I opened the door I caught sight of the man turning away so I know that I did not make any mistake about the matter."

"Well, I never suspected that he would do anything of the kind."

"I did, for I haven't a good opinion of the Mexican."

"Now, alcalde, I am going to talk business to you right from the jump!" the sport exclaimed.

"I did not want to speak before this Mexican for I do not take any stock in the man."

"I know there isn't any love lost between you."

"Not a mite."

"And I can tell you, Mr. Blake, that he hasn't any better opinion of a man about your size than you have of him."

"Oh, I understand all about that, and I don't doubt that he has insinuated to you that the odds were big I had something to do with this outrage."

"Well, I will not deny that he did drop a few hints of that sort."

"And yet he knows very well that these Bloodsuckers have made a dead set at me ever since I struck the town."

"That is so, and it is a mighty strange fact, too," the alcalde observed, thoughtfully.

"You were a stranger here and there was

no reason why this gang should go for you, unless they were pals of that fellow that you had the trouble with on the night when you made your first appearance in Santa Fe."

"I don't think I was attacked on his account," the sport replied. "And I must say I was greatly puzzled to guess why the Bloodsuckers singled me out, but I know a great deal more about Santa Fe, and its people, now than I did in the beginning and I think I can solve the riddle."

"You have an idea why the gang attacked you?"

"Yes, and in order to explain the matter, I shall have to tell you of a little bit of romance in which your daughter figured, and which I am pretty sure will be news to you."

The alcalde looked surprised.

The sport then related the particulars of the warnings which he had received from the mysterious youth, and how, in spite of the pains which his informant had taken in regard to a disguise, had detected that the apparent youth was the alcalde's daughter.

"These circumstances convinced me that your daughter took a great interest in me, and put into my head the idea of coming after her," the Fresh said in conclusion.

"Yes, but I don't see what this has to do with the Bloodsuckers?" Old Bullion declared.

"I am coming to it. My idea of the Bloodsuckers is that they are right here in Santa Fe, or, if the gang is not here, then a pal of theirs is, and the chances are big that the pal is the head devil of the crowd."

Old Bullion nodded assent.

"Now, suppose this fellow has his eyes on your daughter, and discovered that she was taking the trouble to disguise herself in order to meet me. He would be apt to imagine there was a love affair between us, and so would have a motive to attack me."

"Ah, yes, I see now what you are driving at!" the alcalde exclaimed, with knitted brows. "Santilla is in love with my daughter—is a suitor for her hand, and you have jumped to the conclusion that he got the Bloodsuckers to attack you, desiring to rid himself of a man who might turn out to be a dangerous rival."

"Now you have got it down to a dot!" the Fresh exclaimed.

"This is a mighty serious accusation, you know, Blake."

"Oh, yes, I am aware of it, but for all that I have a notion that I am not much out of the way. I think this Mexican is a snake, and I do not trust him at all."

"But he was very active in the pursuit!"

"Yes, I know that. It is the old game; he pretended to be dreadfully eager to catch the rascals, in order to avert suspicion."

"It does not seem possible to me that you can be right about this matter," the alcalde declared, after meditating for a few moments.

"You wrong him, as he wrongs you when he insinuates that you had something to do with the attack."

"Of course there isn't any love lost between us, and we are both ready to think ill of each other; but I am willing to bet you big odds that I am nearer right than he is!" the sport declared.

"Oh, no! I am not going to bet with you," Old Bullion hastened to declare. "I have tried you on once, and got pretty well skinned for my pains, and I don't care to repeat the operation."

"But was it for the purpose of telling me about this suspicion that you desired an interview?" the alcalde asked, after a pause.

"Oh, no! I am not the kind of man to go round and gossip about either my friends or my enemies," the Fresh replied, immediately.

"I told you what I thought about your chief of police as a sort of a starter, so to speak. I mean business, and haven't any idea of taking up your time with any foolishness," the sport explained.

"Ah, yes, I see."

"You are pretty well acquainted with me, and you know that I am not the kind of man who can remain quiet when there is anything going on, and I suppose you did not exactly know what to make of it when you found me so lukewarm in this matter."

"Well, I was surprised," the alcalde admitted. "Particularly as you declared you were deeply interested in my daughter," he added in a grim way.

"Oh, I meant what I said, every word of it!" Blake declared, earnestly.

"But in a game of this kind where a man has got to be careful how he plays if he expects to win, it is mighty bad policy to allow your cards to be seen."

"Yes, yes, undoubtedly!"

"And if I spoke before this Mexican I reckon that it would not be long before the road-agents would know what I proposed to do in the matter."

"Ah, then you have some plan in your mind?" the father exclaimed, eagerly.

"Oh, yes, but I am not proclaiming it from the house-tops, or in the Plaza of Santa Fe, you know."

"I understand."

"My idea of advising you to pay the ransom was to throw this Mexican off the scent," the Fresh explained.

"If he is interested in the gang, as I firmly believe, and is satisfied that no further efforts are going to be made to hunt the outlaws down, the chances are great that they will be thrown off their guard. They will think that there isn't much doubt about their getting the twenty thousand dollars, and so will relax their vigilance."

"Oh, yes, you have figured that out correctly," the alcalde assented.

"No mistake about that! You must send a message to Mad Creek, and go ahead just as if you meant to pay the money."

"Yes, yes, I see."

"But as it may be necessary to gain time you want to proceed slowly," the sport explained.

"Well, a transaction of this sort is not to be settled off-hand like a little cattle trade," the alcalde remarked.

"I don't suppose that you are in the habit of going around with twenty thousand dollars in your clothes."

"No, not much!"

"And to procure such a sum of money will take time."

"Exactly!"

"So it will not be possible for you to rush things much, although I don't doubt that the rascals will be in a tremendous hurry to get their fingers on your coin when they fancy there is a big chance for them to get the ducats."

"Oh, yes, they will be eager for the bargain to be closed, of course."

"And then there is another point!" the alcalde exclaimed as a sudden idea came to him. "I must be certain that there isn't going to be any gum-game about the matter."

"I am not the kind of man to pay over twenty thousand dollars without being certain that I am going to secure my daughter's release."

"Of course! you must be satisfied on that point!" Blake declared.

"And it will take time."

"Exactly! and the rascals, feeling sure that all idea of pursuit has been given up—that the twenty thousand ducats is as good as in their paws, will be certain to be off their guard, and so I may get a chance at them."

"Oh, yes, the probabilities are strong that you will be able to do something."

"Well, I will either make a spoon or spoil a horn, as the old saying is; I have got a little game in my head which I think will work, but it has to be done on the quiet."

The alcalde nodded and the sport departed.

"That fellow is a genius!" Old Bullion declared.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE FRESH'S ALLY.

BLAKE walked leisurely up the street and took his way toward the northwest, but before he reached the outskirts of the town—he was stopped a half-a-dozen times by anxious citizens who inquired of him in regard to the chances of catching the road-agents.

To one and all the sport made the same reply. He reckoned there wasn't much. The fellows had covered up their tracks so there wasn't but little chance of getting on their trail, and from the way the alcalde talked it looked as though he had made up his mind to fork over the twenty thousand dollars.

"This is the proper steer to give these earnest inquirers," the Fresh remarked after he had parted with the last citizen, who accosted him on the very outskirts of the town.

"The report that I haven't any hope of being able to do anything will be sure to be carried to the ears of the road-agents, for it is a moral certainty that they have their spies in the town, even though I may be wrong in my conjecture that this chief of police is one of the gang."

"I would be willing to bet big money though that I am right in my surmise!" the Fresh exclaimed, shaking his head in a very decided way.

"The Mexican is a snake from Snakeville! He has been keeping watch of the girl undoubtedly and made the discovery that she was masquerading as a youth; then he came to the conclusion that there wasn't any chance for him, and as he failed to get me out of the way, for the Bloodsuckers were not good men enough to take my scalp, he tried this road-agent game."

"All he wanted of the girl was her money, and if he succeeds in this trick he will get a stake big enough to satisfy him."

"If I have my usual run of luck though he will not succeed!" the Fresh added. "And I will try and arrange the matter too so as to catch him red-handed, and if he turns out to be the Bloodsucker chief, as I suspect, the chances are big that I will have an opportunity to pay off the little debt I owe him."

While indulging in these meditations the sport had been going on at a good pace.

He had taken the trail which led to the cave dwelling where the Indian girl Lute Winne-mucca found shelter, and was not long in reaching the spot.

"Now then I hope I will be lucky enough to

find the girl at home," he murmured as he approached the old dwelling.

He was destined to have his wish gratified, for when he arrived within a dozen yards of the cave the Indian girl made her appearance.

"You want to see me?" she asked in her abrupt way.

"Yes, that was the object which brought me here," the sport replied.

"I want to talk to you on a little matter of business."

"About the carrying off of this girl?"

"You have guessed rightly," the sport replied, betraying no surprise at the shrewdness of the Indian maid.

"Well, I am ready to hear what you have to say," she remarked, seating herself upon a convenient bowlder.

"Is it safe to speak?" the Fresh asked, casting a searching glance around.

"Oh, yes; no living soul is near; speak without fear."

Blake followed the example of the girl, and sat upon a rock.

"You know all the particulars of the case?"

"Yes, the men of Santa Fe talk of nothing else," she replied.

"And if I mistake not, I saw you up in the hills when the searching parties were trying to hit off the trail."

"Yes, I was after game, and it made me laugh to see how like a set of blundering tenderfeet the white men set about the business."

"Well, they did not go at the job as if they understood much about it," the sport admitted.

"I should say not," the girl remarked, contemptuously.

"The fools ran here and there, and everywhere! If the trail had been perfectly plain and distinct, the idiots would have covered it up."

"Yes, I know that, but as the men were wild with excitement, it was not possible to do anything with them."

"Why do you take any interest in the matter—what is it to you?" the girl demanded, abruptly.

"Well, as you were shrewd enough to guess that I had come to see you in regard to this affair, you ought to be shrewd enough to imagine why I bother myself about it."

"You are in love with this beauty, I suppose," she exclaimed, her proud lips curling in contempt.

"Yes, that is about the size of it, and it is an odd fact, too, for I am not the kind of man who is inclined to yield to the tender passion," the sport remarked in a thoughtful way.

"And does she care for you?"

"Well—yes, I think she does. I am not the kind of man, you understand, who is in the habit of doing much boasting about a matter of this kind, but since you put the question plainly, I am going to answer it. I will tell you why I think so, and then you will know as much about the matter as I do."

Then Blake related how the beautiful Isabelle had sought him, disguised, for the purpose of giving warning that danger threatened.

The Indian girl listened attentively and when Blake came to the end of his tale she nodded and said:

"Yes, there is little doubt that she is in love with you or else she never would have acted in that way."

"That is what I reckoned and so I made bold to speak to the alcalde about the matter."

"And was he not angry?" she demanded.

"He is a proud, stern old man, and regards his girl as the apple of his eye."

"He did not take it in good part, and, in fact, he committed the blunder of trying to choke the idea out of me," the Fresh replied with a laugh.

"But, of course, at a game of that kind, the alcalde was no match for me, as he speedily discovered. I put him on his back and held him there until he agreed to behave himself."

"After such an occurrence I should think he would be more apt to regard you as an enemy than a friend."

"Of course the experience wasn't pleasant, but his respect for me undoubtedly increased. Still, I don't suppose the little affair made him a bit more willing to receive me as a son-in-law."

"I should think not," the Indian girl observed in a thoughtful way.

"This love-making is rather out of my line, anyway," the sport explained.

"There is an old proverb, unlucky at cards, lucky in love, and *vice versa*; my experience is that there is a deal of truth in it. I have always been very lucky at cards, and very unlucky in love affairs. I have managed to win some nice girls but was never able to keep them long, and it may be possible that I am making a mistake in going after this one, but as I have got started I am not going to turn back, for that is not the kind of man I am."

"I feel sure of that—you have a will of iron!" the Indian girl declared.

"Well, I generally stick to a thing pretty tightly if I get fairly started."

"If you should succeed in rescuing the girl from the hands of the road-agents the alcalde may be willing to give her to you," the Indian girl suggested.

"I have not made any bargain of that sort with him—in fact, I should not care to. I don't want to buy the girl with a service any more than I would with money."

"But there is another side to this question: these Bloodsuckers have attacked me; I owe them a grudge, and I always make it a point to pay off old scores of this kind as soon as I can."

And then the sport related his suspicion in regard to the Mexican chief of police.

"It is likely that your guess is correct," the Indian girl remarked.

"I know this Santilla, and he is a snake! I would not place the least trust in him."

"I have come to secure your aid," Blake announced. "I want your assistance, for you know every foot of the country for miles around, and if you will come with me I think the chances are good, we can hunt these rascals down."

"I will go with you!" the red maiden declared.

"And do all I can to aid in the rescue of the girl—not for her sake though, but for yours, for she has always looked upon me with scornful eyes. That is due to her father though principally, I suppose," the girl added, reflectively.

"He has always regarded us red-skins as the dregs of creation, and if he had his way we would be hunted off the face of the earth."

"If you assist to rescue his girl though his gratitude undoubtedly will be great."

"Bah! I care not for it!" the Indian girl exclaimed, scornfully.

"What can he do for me, either for good or evil? Nothing! If I go, I go on your account! You took my part when the white men were howling for my blood, and while I live I will never forget it."

"Oh, that is all right!" Blake declared. "You squared that account when you saved me from the assassin who sought my life."

"No, no! I do not consider that the debt is paid yet!" she protested.

"Well, I do, and if you aid me in this matter I will be under obligations to you," the sport replied.

"I will, and can aid you," Lute Winnemucca declared.

"Have you a clew?"

"Yes, a wounded ruffian is now in my power and has agreed to reveal the secret of the mysterious band to me. In fact he commenced the tale, but fainted before he made much progress. As soon as he recovers strength he will speak, and then I think it will be an easy matter to track the outlaws to their hiding-place."

"A lucky chance!" the Fresh declared.

"Is there not to be another scouting expedition this afternoon?"

"Yes, but I doubt its success."

"When you return from the search I will meet you in Santa Fe, and then I may have news of importance for you."

"Thanks! Do not fail, and afterward ask what you will of me!" Blake exclaimed, as he took his departure.

"All I ask is yourself, and that treasure the alcalde's daughter has won!" the Indian girl muttered sadly to herself after the sport had gone.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A REVELATION.

AND now we will follow the fortunes of the girl.

In the foot-hills the two men who seemed to be white, overtook their dusky companions with their fair burden.

The screams of the girl had been stopped in the most unceremonious manner.

The rider, in whose strong arms she was clasped, had drawn his knife and clapped it to her throat so close that the keen point actually broke the skin.

"Squaw yell—die!" he exclaimed, and from the guttural tone Isabelle comprehended that she was in the power of a red-skin.

And she knew enough of these brutal red-men to understand that they would not hesitate to kill her on the instant if they thought their interests could be served by so doing.

Besides, now that the first alarm was over, common sense came to her aid.

To scream aloud, and by so doing anger her captors, would not help her position in the least.

On the contrary, if she was docile and obedient, she might expect far better treatment than she would receive by being ugly.

She had got the idea into her head that she was being carried away for the purpose of extorting a ransom, for she had heard of such things being done, and so she was not so uneasy in her mind as she might have been under the circumstances.

After the two white men joined the red bucks the party turned and headed straight for the Rio Grande.

In the river they walked their horses up the stream until they came to where a small creek came into the river from the west; up this muddy creek they went, the flowing waters as a mat-

ter of course obliterating all traces of the horses' hoofs in a short time.

They followed the creek for a good two miles until they came to its head-waters amid a rocky region.

All the details had been carefully planned.

When the time came for them to leave the stream the horses' hoofs were muffled in pads made by wrapping pieces of skin around them, so that when the steed again took to the land their hoofs left no marks upon the soil.

This was why the trackers were baffled.

In a secluded nook high up amid a rocky range was an old shanty which had been constructed by some hunter who had made the place his headquarters while in search of game.

In this old house the girl was put.

We have neglected to say that the two white men did not go on up the stream with the red-skins and their captive, but they went down the river until they came to a point where the well-trodden trail came so close to the bank that they were unable to reach it without leaving any tell-tale marks.

And on the trail itself their hoof-prints were lost amid a hundred others.

The girl was placed in the cabin and the door securely fastened, the red-skins taking up their quarters just outside, and while one slept the other watched, so she was never without a vigilant guard.

At sunset some dried meat with crackers and a tin cup of water was furnished her.

She ate the scanty provision, for she reasoned that she might have need of all her strength, not knowing what was in store for her.

Some hours after darkness set in, about ten o'clock as near as he could judge, she began to feel her eyes grow heavy. There was a rude bunk, composed of pine boughs and skins, in one corner of the apartment, and she thought she would get some rest.

Through the large open space in the roof the moonbeams shone so that there was ample light for her to distinguish the objects around her.

But just as she approached the bunk, with intention of lying down, the sound of conversation without attracted her attention, and then heavy footsteps approached the door.

The fastenings were removed and the chief of the Bloodsuckers entered.

"Well, how do you get on?" he asked.

The outlaw was not as careful to disguise his voice this time as he had been on the previous occasion when she had heard it, and the quick ears of the girl recognized familiar tones.

"Great heavens! can it be possible?" she cried, so surprised by the discovery that she forgot her caution.

"What is possible?" he asked, amazed.

"That you are—" and then too late the reflection came that she was acting heedlessly in allowing the man to know that she had discovered who and what he was.

"Aha, your sharp wits have discovered me then?"

The girl knew not what to say.

"No use to attempt to conceal the truth; I see you have penetrated my disguise, but it makes no difference now," and then with an impatient movement he removed his mask, wig and flowing beard, and the face of Miguel Santilla, the chief of police of Santa Fe, stood revealed.

"I have been playing a bold game for the last year and this stroke caps the climax," he continued.

"I made up my mind to make you mine the first time I looked upon your face. I would gladly have won you openly and if I had succeeded, your father's wealth would have enabled me to give up my life of crime, but I soon saw that there wasn't any chance for me, and then too I read in your eyes the secret that you had allowed yourself to become fascinated by this miserable adventurer, and then I made up my mind that if I had to yield to him I would contrive to secure a good slice of your father's wealth in exchange and by this little operation I think I shall succeed in that design."

"It was by my advice that this Eastern trip was undertaken."

"I suspected that you had a hand in the matter!" exclaimed the girl, indignantly. "And although I made no objection to the trip it was my intention, the moment I was free to do so, to discontinue the journey and return in disguise to Santa Fe."

"Well, you are safely caged for the present, and after I get the twenty thousand dollars ransom which I have demanded of your father, you can marry this cursed Blake if you so desire. I, in another land, can find as fair a woman to enjoy my fortune."

Two shots fired in rapid succession interrupted the speaker at this point.

"Aha! are we surprised?" the Mexican cried, drawing his revolvers and rushing to the door, but before he reached it, there was the sound of another shot.

The door swung violently and Spanish John, the keeper of the Golden Monte Palace, clutching in his hand the disguises which in his agony he had torn from his face, fell heavily into the apartment.

A glance through the open doorway revealed

that the two Indians were down, writhing in the agonies of death.

The bandits had been surprised in their lair, and forth from the little clump of timber which had sheltered them came the Fresh of Frisco and the Indian girl, Lute Winnemucca.

"Surrender!" cried Blake, with leveled revolver, when he beheld the chief of police outlined in the doorway.

"Never, accursed dog!" cried the Mexican, in desperation, attempting to level his revolver, forgetting in his anger that he had not raised the hammer of the weapon.

The Indian girl was ready for the fray, though, and fired immediately, much to Blake's disappointment, for he had made up his mind to take the fellow alive.

The aim of Lute Winnemucca was only too true, and Miguel Santilla, with a bullet through his heart, fell dead across the threshold of the doorway.

Isabelle was saved and the Bloodsucker band exterminated, for, with the exception of Laff Pick, who protested that in the future he would lead a different life, not a single one of the gang remained alive.

The story of the rescue is soon told.

Laff Pick, in exchange for his life, revealed the secret from the Bloodsucker band, and when, after the return from the unsuccessful scouting expedition, the Indian girl sought the Fresh of Frisco and told him what she had learned, it was an easy matter to watch for the time when the two outlaws would steal away from Santa Fe in order to visit their captive.

They were followed by Blake and the Indian girl, and the result the reader knows.

The joy of the alcalde, Old Bullion, and the delight of the citizens of Santa Fe at the rescue of the girl unharmed, can easily be imagined.

"Ask anything that you like of me, Blake, and it is yours!" Marmaduke cried.

"Don't make any rash promises, alcalde," responded the Californian, significantly.

"You'll find me a man of my word!" Old Bullion replied with great dignity.

The solution of the mystery in regard to the strange voices that Isabelle heard, thanks to Laff Pick, was reached.

Under the ranch was a secret cellar with a private entrance, and there the gang was wont to meet. At some distant day a pipe had conducted the water from the roof into a cistern in the cellar. The pipe being broken acted as a speaking-tube.

Our tale is told, reader; a few more words only.

A grand wedding is announced; the grandest that Santa Fe has ever seen, and the bride and groom are Isabelle Marmaduke and the Californian adventurer, who proudly calls himself the Fresh of Frisco,

THE END.

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